My Word Shall Not Return to Me Empty:
A Sacramental Homiletic of Appropriation and Action

by

Stephen Persons Parkes

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emmanuel College
and the Pastoral Department of the Toronto School of Theology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology
awarded by Emmanuel College and the University of Toronto

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Abstract

The New Homiletic has often avoided the concept of application in sermons, preferring to allow listeners to respond to the gospel as they will without the need for the preacher to prescribe their response. The result has been artful and poetic sermons that may not focus on empowering and explicitly inviting listeners to participate in the gospel being proclaimed. This thesis offers the concept of appropriation to homiletics as a rethinking of the notion of application. Appropriation is the preacher’s and hearer’s embodied, active response to God’s Word in the biblical text. A theology of God’s Word as aiming toward appropriation is discovered in the theology of Deutero-Isaiah and particularly in Isaiah 55:10-11. This theology will be seen to be supremely expressed in the Church’s understandings of the incarnation of Jesus, the Word made flesh.

The hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur is examined to explain how narratives and metaphoric language fund the capacity to act in the human imagination on an individual level and in social imaginaries on the corporate level. Appropriation is found to be a key Ricoeurian concept in the movement from action described in texts to actions lived out through bodies. The thesis grounds Ricoeur’s general hermeneutics to specifically Christian hermeneutics at the point of the sacramental. Preaching and sacrament(al)s are understood as
embodied liturgical appropriations of God’s Word. The sacramental theologies of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley are examined to see how appropriation is the aim of both preaching and the sacraments. The work of several Protestant and Catholic homiletics reveals how preaching can be aimed more purposefully at appropriation through a process of 1) encountering God’s Word in the text/sermon; 2) playfully suspending reality to consider possible actions; and 3) appropriating God’s Word as one’s own through hearer-determined confession and ethical behaviour. Several practical strategies toward appropriation are offered as well as specific thoughts about the teaching of preaching as appropriation.
Acknowledgements

As a United Methodist minister under episcopal appointment, I must first acknowledge Bishop Paul L. Leeland and my covenant partners in ministry, the Order of Elders of the Alabama-West Florida Conference for giving me the freedom and blessing to pursue this work. God has used the connection of people called Methodist to shape a passion for preaching in me. I am thankful for your continued prayer and support.

Many colleagues and friends became important conversation partners and contributed in important ways to the content of this thesis. In particular, I am grateful to Derek Knoke for the many ways that our friendship and conversations have led to so much of this work. I am also grateful to Sarah Travis for reading early drafts of chapters and making helpful comments. Joan Vinall-Cox also read much of the thesis and gave me helpful suggestions as well as so much inspiration over many excellent meals and scintillating conversations. The ever-present supportive community at www.phinished.org gave me virtual hugs, constant good writing vibes, and occasional, well-deserved KITAs. For those of you who haunted “Tomatoes Together” and the “Phiphties Rooms” from 2011 to 2015, I am indebted to you. Balloons, please!

A network of friends across the USA and Canada have propped me up before the world and, my friends, I thank you: Darrow Woods, Karen Chilstrom, Gena Rawdon, Christopher Steele, and Keith Dixon. At various times, my two best friends, Karen Neave and Darlene Funnell were the living embodiment of a loving God to me.

Many local congregations have suffered through my various homiletical attempts to “practice” what this thesis “preaches.” In particular, however, I must recognize the tolerant patience of Maple Grove United Church of Canada (Oakville, ON), Knox Presbyterian Church (Oakville, ON), and Cloverdale United Methodist Church (Dothan, Alabama, USA). You have endured much, and my appreciation for the rich ways in which you appropriate the gospel of Jesus Christ is boundless.

I am also deeply indebted to the tremendous faculty and staff of Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. In particular, Thomas Reynolds and William Kervin taught me with acuity and generosity, and they read early forms of some of these ideas. Their encouragement was palpable, and they were helpful even to point of examining the defence. Additionally, Ron Kuipers of the Institute of Christian Studies stoked my love of Paul Ricoeur and post-structuralist philosophy. His brilliance and good humour have been a gift. Alexandra F. Johnston, Department of English in the School of Graduate Studies, also examined me on this thesis, and I am grateful for her participation.

I am indeed fortunate to have been instructed by two world-class homiletical theologians. David Schnasa Jacobsen taught in the Toronto School of Theology for two years before departing to Boston University School of Theology. David’s constant call to attend to the theologies which inform our proclamation has been deeply formative for me. He combines the pastor’s care with the prophet’s edge, both bound together by careful, critical thought. I look forward to many years of working with him in our guild.

Nothing I could write here would adequately reflect my appreciation for Paul Scott Wilson. He is the reason why I chose to come to Toronto to study. In our first conversations he introduced me to Paul Ricoeur, who has become such a fruitful interlocutor. Paul taught me, corrected me, guided me, and began every private conversation by asking how my ideas for the thesis were coming. As his graduate assistant and research fellow for three years, I
witnessed both his kindness and his boldness in shaping pastors for preaching in local churches and his receptivity in being shaped by them. I can only hope to reflect in my own pedagogical future a portion of the same passion, devotion to teaching, and determined persistence that God be the focus of every sermon. I am not only a better scholar and teacher as a result of our collaboration; I am a better Christian. I am profoundly grateful for him.

My very highest, deepest, and broadest thanks go to my former spouse and abiding co-parent and friend, the Rev. Amy E. Persons. She made this sojourn for study possible by first acknowledging in me the gifts and the longing to pursue this academic path. Then she was willing to uproot our family from all that we had ever known, our families, friends, and our connection of ministry, to move to another country with our two fine children, Will and Harper. She made many, many sacrifices as did our kids. All I have to offer them in return is this thesis. Most of the worthy ideas in this work first developed in conversation with Amy. Much of the praise and none of the fault accrues to her account.
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Do You See What I See? A Sermon for Advent 3, Year A ............................................. 266
Then Mary said,
"Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word."
(Luke 1:38a)
Introduction

I. The Mainline Sermon as Mental Exercise – A Homiletical Problem

Two different ecclesial experiences prompt this thesis. First, in 22 years of pastoral ministry I have shaken hands with many people after worship and heard them say, “Thank you for that sermon, pastor. You gave me a lot to think about today.” Preachers often hear such comments from parishioners filing out of the sanctuary on the way back to the rest of their lives. Equally as often, preachers are left wondering whether the sermon will inspire any real difference or find its way through the individual imagination and out into embodied action. David Lose, in a recent article, related a scene in which a participant at a preaching conference bemoaned that the sermon and its ideas were not in conversation at all among the congregants during the fellowship hour immediately after worship. Rather, they were speaking with each other about the events and happenings of their lives that were “worth sharing.”¹ Lose indicates that many preachers of the so-called “mainline” Protestant tradition nurse an anxiety about the relevance and efficacy of their sermons. How could we feel otherwise “as we have witnessed our congregations diminish, our denominations decline, and our influence in the culture slowly disappear”?² Given this pressure, is it any wonder that preachers and hearers alike might question whether God is speaking in the sermon, that God’s Word would be heard, especially among white mainline Protestants?

The most prominent homiletical trend among mainline churches during this period of decline (from roughly 1965 to the present) is the movement known as the New Homiletic. For several hundred years, sermons often followed an exegesis-proposition-application

¹ David J. Lose, “Preaching 2.0,” Word & World 30, no. 3 (June 1, 2010): 300.

² Ibid., 301.
model which deduced what the text said, what it means, and how to apply it. The New Homiletic of the 1960s was a hermeneutical revolution in preaching which avoided prescriptive application of deduced “points” in favour of sermons that evoked an imaginative encounter with God through attention to the literary qualities of the biblical text, in particular the use of narrative. The New Homiletic sermon seeks to communicate content by identifying with the hearer rather than by heavy-handed, rhetorical persuasion and moral prescriptions rooted in a sense of pastoral authority that simply no longer applies in many churches and North American culture. As a result, the notion of application in the sermon often has been left off as unnecessary at best and as a misuse of pastoral authority at worst. One scholar of the New Homiletic has put it thus: “You show them their lives in light of the gospel and they will do something with it.”

Ironically, the ascendancy of the New Homiletic tracks with the numeric decline of mainline Protestant churches. Apparently, the “something” that they “did with it” was to leave the Church or to pass away without passing on Christian faith to new generations in such a way that the Church maintained or grew its number of adherents.

Some New Homileticians have corrected its course by calling for a more fulsome focus on God and theology in addition to the hearers’ capacity to gather the sermon in consciousness. Others, expressing a lack of trust in preachers to use their role and language well to shape experience of the gospel, have advocated ethical approaches to preaching. We will argue for a focus on appropriation of the sermon (as opposed to application) by both preacher and hearer as a means of understanding preaching as God speaking in the church to

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3 Indeed, this particular model still holds for many conservative evangelical preachers today. For a classic exposition of this model see John Albert Broadus, A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons (Philadelphia; New York: Smith, English & Co.; Sheldon & Co., 1870). Several subsequent editions of this text have been printed.

4 The Renewed Homiletic (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 13.
the individual imagination and yet empowering of ethical human action on both individual and social levels. We think it possible that people might leave a service of liturgical worship and preaching empowered to continue their worship in voice and body through the week. In fact, the liturgy perhaps might become an imaginative model for Christian life beyond the borders of the church property.

The second ecclesial experience was a baptism of a young person. I was serving a congregation in my United Methodist tradition and one of our youth who had not grown up in the Church asked to be baptized. I was delighted to celebrate this moment in her life and the life of our congregation. As I placed the water on her head and spoke the deep words of Christian tradition (“I baptize you in the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”) I began to wonder which “I” it was that was doing the baptizing. Traditional Christian doctrine states that it was not “I” as an individual alone who was baptizing; nor was it solely the “I” who holds the pastoral office in this congregation, although both of these “I”s are constitutive of baptism. Rather, God baptizes through the church. Scandalous though it may feel, the primary “I” indicated in this ritual action was God. No one blinked an eye, however. No question arose in the congregation as to whether or not the youth was actually baptized. No one stood back and said, “Well, maybe she was baptized.” Every member of that congregation would have accepted that this person was indeed baptized, and most would have accepted, by faith, that God, through the church, had done it. Now, might there have been some doubters about this? Probably so. But for most, the sacrament would have been viewed as efficacious in its intention to initiate this person into Christ’s church.

What truly caught my attention about this, however, was a comparison in my mind between what had happened in that sacramental moment and what often happens in white,
mainline Protestant preaching. Few preachers in our age would dare to speak for God, much less employ the divine “I” in a sermon in the mode of direct speech to hearers. Similarly, few congregants would claim the same efficacy of grace through preaching as they would through the sacraments. Rather, for a variety of reasons (some very good and most well-documented), the language of the sermon typically does not carry the same efficacious authority as the language of the sacrament.

Reasons abound for this difference, and they have been as carefully numerated as an autopsy. Our thesis accepts many of these critiques for preaching, and yet we are puzzled as to why they seem more applicable to preaching than to the sacramental life of the church. In churches that observe the sacraments, any question about who is authorized to perform them is usually answered with clear definition. Often the ritual forms of sacraments include language hundreds, even thousands of years old. One might even imagine the hearer rejecting the words of a preacher who presumes to speak for (or even as) God in the sermon while fully embracing the same presumption by the same pastor as she elevates a host and says, “This is my body, given for you.”

Sermonic language and sacramental language are treated differently. Some of the reasons for this difference are endemic to each task, and we will outline some of these reasons in this thesis. However, our hunch is that the sermon is often viewed more through the lens of textual interpretation rather than ritual action. To arrive at the sermon, even the New Homiletic sermon, preachers often spend much of their time discovering an explanation of the text that will help the congregation understand something about the God to which the text points. Sacraments, too, seek understanding but also invite an embodied response, a participation borne out of the faith elicited from the words of the ritual, and, of course, from
the words of the biblical text and the sermon. Our question is this: How can the sermon invite a more fulsome sense of listener appropriation?

II. The Embodied Word of God – A Hopeful and Holy Purpose

This thesis develops the theological underpinnings of a homiletic of action and appropriation. The word *appropriation* has Latin origins and comes into the English language through French. The root of the word is an adjective, “propre,” which in French means “one’s own.” To appropriate something, then, is to render it as one’s own, to take that which is alien and own it. Appropriation can have negative connotations as well as positive. If one person appropriates the creative work of another without ascription or permission or if a government appropriates land belonging to indigenous people without consultation or remuneration: these are misappropriations. However, one can make an idea, a concept, or a vision one’s own in ways that transform life positively in every way, from belief to action. One might assert that the very reason that humans write is to inscribe our ideas in such a way that they may be taken up again, even across time and space, and made another’s in the process of reading.

This thesis will argue that in preaching, *appropriation is the imaginative hinge upon which turns the sermon’s motion from inert biblical text to living human action.* *Appropriation marks the moment in preaching when mental images become real action and when, with the help of the Holy Spirit, possibilities become capabilities on both individual and corporate levels. It marks the preacher’s as well as the hearers’ participation in the sermon from reception to embodiment via the movement from encountering the biblical text to public, personal confession and action.* Appropriation is
both the aim of preaching, but in many ways IS preaching. A sermon can be God’s Word owned and enacted by both the preacher and by those who hear and respond.

The New Homiletic has put much emphasis on performance in two ways. First, the sermon is an event performed by a preacher before an audience. Nearly all New Homileticians have thus emphasized the poetic nature of sermons, and some have focused on the theatrical performance of them. Second, the New Homiletic has broadly recognized, and also criticized, the performative nature of the language which constitutes the sermon. Words can be powerful and perform certain actions by being spoken in the sermon. This thesis is unique in that it invites the preachers of New Homiletic sermons to more deeply consider congregational participation in addition to sermonic performance. This thesis offers that the language of the sermon and the biblical text can potentially, positively reverberate through worship, through the community of faith, and through the flesh and blood of congregants.

Appropriation in the homiletical sense is essentially sacramental and our understanding of homiletics sees the sacramental as a model for preaching. Like the sacraments, preaching depends on the discernment of God’s initiating action in the Bible and in contemporary life. But, also like the sacraments, the expectation of authentic participation is rendered plain, and the invitation to respond is clearly extended. Appropriation discovers that Christian worship is the Church’s imagination and, often, the first place of congregational confession and participation in divine action in our own lives.

Ultimately, one might understand this as a homiletic of sanctification, of God at work through the Word in preacher and hearer alike to empower holiness of life. We believe that the pioneers of the New Homiletic were right to call for sermons that engaged the whole person via the imagination. Such sermons can inspire experiences of God through local
performance of the biblical text. However, the sermon could also invite people to respond, in
the worship context itself and beyond, with their own participation, their own confessions,
and their own ethical acts. We envision sermons that are more tightly connected to the acts of
worship within which preaching is usually set and more considerate of those acts in the
development of the sermon itself. Like the sacraments in which celebrants take material
objects, consecrate them toward God’s purposes, and invite, even expect, participation from
the gathered community, so also the preacher takes the biblical text, the gift of language, and
human experience and breaks them open to reveal a God who is both calling and
empowering hearers to such a faith that cannot keep from participating, bodily, in the
promise of the gospel.

Another distinctive aspect of this thesis is that it posits a homiletic which is
thoroughly Wesleyan in its theology. As a United Methodist pastor, I have been pleased to
see us bring significant clarity to our theologies of baptism and the Eucharist.\(^5\) Curiously,
however, for a denomination in which preaching has certainly been the most ubiquitous and
oft-practised ritual act, no similar denominational attempt to clarify and articulate a
Wesleyan or Methodist homiletic has been undertaken. This thesis will offer my initial
thoughts toward such a project.

### III. Seeking the Source of Christian Action – A Helpful Method

We will begin in a somewhat backwards fashion. We find it necessary to step back
from the point of human action in order to trace its origins. Human action is born from

\(^5\) In particular, see Gayle Carlton Felton’s outstanding works, *This Gift of Water: The Practice and
Theology of Baptism among Methodists in America* (Abingdon Press, 1992) and *This Holy Mystery: A United
Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Discipleship Resources, 2005).
human capability, a subject of no small Christian theological significance. We cannot act where we are not capable of acting. That capability is rendered in both individual and collective forms of action. We posit that the ground of potential human action is the imagination; however, not simply the individual imagination. Christian action often takes corporate forms, both in terms of certain confessions and also ethics, i.e. speaking truth and acting in a manner consonant with that truth. Therefore, a cognate to the Christian imagination on the social level must be discerned, a social “imaginary “of sorts. Used as an adjective, “imaginary” modifies the noun following as not real but a fiction based in a mental image. However, sociologists and contemporary philosophers use the term as a noun to denote something more complex. Charles Taylor’s definition is helpful and succinct: “the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life.” A social imaginary is comprised of more than just theories or ideas; it is made up of those images, legends, myths, stories that groups tell through generations to define our cultural horizons and make corporate actions meaningful. As we will use the terms, “imagination” will represent that individual capacity to project images and act on them. An “imaginary” will represent the corporate, social capacity to similarly act. As we will see, Paul Ricoeur will use this term to denote the ways that powerful people in a social system can use the metaphoric power of language to shape and reshape identity within that system.

As we step further back, we discover that the individual imagination and social imaginaries on their own produce nothing that appears as specifically Christian action; rather, they must be seeded with possibility, some narrative which either confirms and solidifies

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Christian identity or presents a welcome alternative. For most Christians, that set of narratives which delivers the idea of God to the imagination, as well as the consequent confessions which derive from such a set, is the canon of Christian Scripture. The Christian social imaginary is shaped by the biblical text and the preaching of those texts. As Christians, these texts and the public performance of them make our actions make sense; they are the background of norms out of which our contemporary corporate action grows.

The various narrations of a God-who-acts found in the biblical witnesses invites the imagination of, and human confession in, such a God-who-acts within the realm of their own preconfigured and reinterpreted lives. This prompting elicits confession and certain ethics – together these are known in Christian parlance under another category – worship. Worship, while many might circumscribe it to liturgical performance in ecclesial contexts, will be spoken of here as any and all human action offered in response to God’s prevenient action narrated through the Scriptures and located particularly in the narratives about Jesus, God’s Christ. Ecclesial liturgical worship is only one form of worship in this larger sense. It is, however, an important one. Liturgy, for the church, functions as that sense of corporate imagination, a social imaginary if you will, where the church “tries on” what it means to worship beyond church walls and out into the rest of life. In liturgy, the ancient stories are, potentially, rendered contemporary in the community of faith. The written biblical genres which record God’s words and actions in the past are in a sense reconstituted into speech and action in the liturgy; the record of God’s words become a performance of the Word of God.

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7 We are not implying that there is a single Christian imaginary within which all Christians find themselves. Our denominations and divisions are often shaped by the ways in which we privilege some texts over against others and authorize canons with the canon. However, we believe that most Christian social imaginaries are rooted in the biblical texts and their performance in worship in some ways.
We believe that the central theological idea which elicits action from the reader/hearer of Scripture is the Word of God. Traditional Christianity has located God’s Word in numerous forms. For one, Karl Barth advocated a threefold notion of the Word of God. First, the Word of God is preached; second, the Word of God is written in the Bible; third, and underlying the other two, the Word of God is revealed. God’s Word is revealed in events, through preaching, and through the record of such events about God in the Scriptures. The Church gathers in recollection (remembering God’s Word in the past and responds to God’s summons) and in anticipation (living in hope of the next Word from God). But that Word will come through human voices, through readers and preachers and choristers and others who will speak their faith in the God-who-acts. What seems lacking in Barth’s definition is a clear sense of the ends to which the Word of God might be the means.

Recent critiques of preaching often focus on the clergy-centred and clergy-controlled notion of God’s Word in all its forms. The clergy class, being educated in certain forms of biblical interpretation, is deemed qualified and authorized to bring the hermeneutical art to bear on the texts. Clergy preach and thereby, with hope, reveal the God-who-acts in our own day. The Word of God is thus performed through the sermon and the worship service for an audience which is often seen as more or less passive in its reception.

A fresh theology of the Word of God is needed to fund a more participatory, sacramental homiletic. We must negotiate two pitfalls on either side of our path forward. To one side is an “antinomian” theology of the Word of God which says, “Just listen. The Word is powerful. God has done everything for you, and no response is really required of you other

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than the gratitude you may express to Christ who has been righteous in your stead and to the preacher who has confessed Christ for your sake. You are justified.” To the other side looms the Pelagian cliff: “The Word of God is really a concept that stands in for the best wisdom that we could devise for human life. If you want to be a better person, then you are well capable of making a different response, and this sermon will surely inspire your will to take action and choose the good.”

A middle path discovers a theology of the Word of God that is initiated by God through motifs of promise and summons. Through the Word, God “rains” possibilities for faithful response into the individual and corporate imaginations, and God calls hearers to take action. However, the response itself is not utterly predetermined; rather, the hearer cooperates with God to enact the Word into their own contexts. The Word of God is divinely-initiated, but brought to synergistic fulfillment in worship. By worship, we mean the full array of possible action no matter the locale: liturgical, homiletical, testimonial, moral, ethical. All of these, in the end, are categories of worship. To develop this programme, the Word theology of Deutero-Isaiah (DI – Isaiah 40-55) will collaborate with Christian tradition through the sacramental theologies of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley and the modern hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. In fact, we find Ricoeur’s interpretive trajectory from text to action to be an excellent methodological device for our purposes. We will trace a theology of the Word of God from its roots in the biblical text, through the historical imaginations of the Reformers and contemporary theologians and homileticians, and out into the practical action of the sermon.

We begin with the biblical roots of appropriation that can be located in the Word of God theology of Deutero-Isaiah. In chapter one, DI will offer a profound image of God’s
word as divinely-given rain which finds its end through human flourishing. We conclude that this motif has been influential upon the Christology of the Christian scriptures and the early centuries of the Church. God’s Word is not something that just happens to us; it longs to happen through us, just as it happened through Christ and continues to happen, in a sacramental way, in preaching and worship, appropriation will be seen to be a feature of God’s Word and not simply a half-expected result of preaching.

Having discerned the biblical foundation for the concept, we will turn in chapter two to the hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. We will examine the implication of several essays by Ricoeur at a turning point in his thought and oeuvre. These essays from the collection, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II, reveal a shift in Ricoeur’s attention from a textual hermeneutics located primarily in metaphor to a hermeneutics on the plane of action. Ricoeur’s concept of appropriation will be examined as the hinge which connects the possibilities presented by metaphors to the choice of specific actions by preacher and congregation. In chapter three, we will recognize the implications of Ricoeur’s thought in the production of sermons and translate his categories into useful terms for preaching.

The fourth chapter discovers the Word of God as the common origin of both preaching and sacraments and views appropriation as an integral part of God’s Word. In particular, the early Luther’s hermeneutics of letter and spirit, Calvin’s notion of the “sacramental word,” and Wesley’s theology of responsible grace will reveal the parabolic and tensive work of metaphor as the sacramental impulse at work in both preaching and the sacraments of the church. Chapter five surveys the field of homiletics from the mid-twentieth century to the present to examine how various thinkers have explored appropriation and the
notion of preaching as sacramental, as the “material object” which, through appropriation, points both to God’s own creative speech and also confers the empowering grace to respond to God’s summons.

Chapter six examines the implications of such a theology of sacramental appropriation on the practice of preaching and the teaching of preaching, paying special attention to the homiletics of Paul Scott Wilson and David Lose as consonant with our approach.
We have indicated a need for a fresh theology of the Word of God, one that includes human response in its formulation. Preaching, though it may become a Word from God, is also a response to a Word from God discovered in the merging of the horizons of the biblical text with the horizons of the preacher’s life to the point of some revelation. This revelation is then taken up into the preacher’s life to the point of public confession and testimony.

Preaching, in our estimation, is not something that clergy do on behalf of the hearers; rather, preaching is a model of how any person might themselves participate in the revelation and reception of God’s Word. God’s Word is not the property of the clergy class or of preachers; the Word of God descends through the biblical text and the contemporary culture into and through preaching and then into and through the lives of others. Preaching is the appropriation of God’s Word seeking the hearers’ appropriation of God’s Word.

Already we are experiencing some confusion about the polyvalence of the term “Word of God.” Is the Word of God the biblical text? Is the Word of God present as preaching? Is God’s Word simply the person of Jesus Christ? This thesis will discover God’s Word in many ways, as have theologians throughout Christian history. However, for us, a theology and a practice of God’s Word must begin with God’s initiative through the biblical text.

As our starting point, we will interpret Isaiah 55:10-11 as a hermeneutic for thinking about the Word of God:

10: For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
Why begin with these? First, as we will see, these verses (and the simile that drives them) seem few and small; yet they gather into themselves notions about the Word of God that refer back as far as creation and forward into futures yet unseen; second, we can easily employ their form as a heuristic device to describe God’s Word both in DI’s context and also into our own. Third, DI offers them at a critical time in Israel’s history when, after a season of seeming judgment, God is doing a “new thing” creating new options, revealing new initiative right in their own historical context. Thus, we believe that the theology that drives these ideas stand to offer Christian preaching some new things in our own contexts. Before we turn to analyze the central simile of this passage, we will locate these verses within their immediate literary setting and within the corpus of Isaiah.

I. Unpacking a metaphor: Rain and Snow as God’s Word in Is. 55:10-11

A. Historical and Exegetical Starting Points

It is important to consider several assumptions about this passage and its location in the text of Isaiah as an historical document and also in the theology of this prophetic work. First of all, we assume along with most contemporary scholars that there are at least two and probably three divisions of Isaiah comporting with three different historical periods. These broad divisions are often named thus: Chapters 1-39 – “Isaiah of Jerusalem” or “Proto-Isaiah” (PI), Chapters 40-55 – “Deutero-Isaiah” or “Second Isaiah” (DI), and Chapters 56-66 – “Trito-Isaiah” or “Third Isaiah”(TI). Generally these sections are meant to correspond with

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1 All scripture references are NRSV unless otherwise noted.
the history of Judah in the following way: Isaiah of Jerusalem addressed the 8th century BCE nation of Judah during the reign of Hezekiah. Second Isaiah addressed the 6th century BCE communities of the Jewish diaspora with centers at both Babylon and Jerusalem. Third Isaiah addressed the 6th – 5th century BCE Israelite community of restoration during the building of the second temple.² While there is considerable debate in recent scholarship about these divisions and their role in interpretation of the Book of Isaiah as a whole, this schema is at least valuable in that it helps us to establish the literal or historical referents to the words which each “prophet” employs. Thus, we assume that since 55:10-11 are located within DI that they were originally addressed to the Jewish diaspora following the 6th BCE exile into Babylon, and that the force of the rhetoric is aimed at persuading the Jewish exiles in Babylon (and perhaps elsewhere) to return to Jerusalem and Mt. Zion and restore the city. DI locates the decree of the victorious Persian king Cyrus to release the Judean exiles from Babylon within the purpose and intention of God. Trito-Isaiah’s rhetorical aim in 56-66 appears to be to negotiate the realities of the restored Zion.

Further, we assume that DI functions not only to call Israel to physically return to Zion but to first elicit a spiritual response within individuals and communities to “return” to God with faith, to trust that the God who had judged Israel harshly in the past was now opening a future of promise. For the exilic community in Babylon to return to Zion was a physical and active expression of their reception of the Word of God through DI, an appropriation of that Word. For the community which remained in Zion’s ruins and was

called to receive the returning exiles and join in the restorative project, no less a call to active, receptive faith rings from DI.

B. The Word of God in DI

Isaiah 55:10-11 function with other citations within (and beyond) DI to drive a sort of Word of God (in Hebrew, dabar Yahweh) theology. Many interpreters have shared that Isaiah 40 (verse 8, in particular) and 55:10-11 act as a sort of inclusio of the Word. These verses along with many other references to an unfailing Word of God in chapters 40-66 reveal that the Word of God is intended to be understood as a theological claim important to the rhetorical force of the prophet[s] as they addressed exilic and post-exilic Judah. In fact, God’s Word is portrayed as a primary agent in the restoration of Zion. Where grasses and flowers fade, God’s Word does not (40:8); God’s Word confirms the words of messengers (preachers?) who predict the restoration of Zion (44:26); God’s Word is irrevocable – every knee shall bow and every tongue confess to God (45:23); God’s Word through the servant (preaching?) sustains the weary; God places God’s Word in the mouths of the people (51:16) and in the word of messengers who announce peace and salvation (52:7). The prophet identifies God’s Word as indestructible and irrevocable on the one hand, but expressed through human messengers (indeed through the prophet’s own writing and speaking). We may, thus, understand DI’s concept of the Word of God as thoroughly incarnational and inviting of human participation and collaboration.

3 Among the citations in DI which I count important for this purpose are 40:8, 41:28, 44:26, 45:23, 50:4, 51:16, and 55:10-11.
C. The Word of God in Isaiah 55

Chapter 55 concludes DI’s message of hope and promise with an invitation to freely experience God’s sustenance (water, wine, milk, bread). Other “words” do not satisfy the community’s deep need for restoration and for faith (1-2). To one who will listen, God will speak words of life and covenant. Interestingly, the covenant with the people will be the same one made to David, now extended from a single person, beyond even the monarchs, to the whole people of God. In other words, DI takes God’s covenant with a single ruler (as per Isa. 7 and 9, Jer. 30:9 and Ezek. 34:23-24) and “democratizes” it toward a commitment to the whole nation (3-5).  

This reinterpretation is interesting because it is a model of how the metaphor of vss. 10-11 will work. The Word of God’s promise to David is not repudiated, but is taken up and interpreted in a new way given the 6th century context of DI. One institution in apparent failure (the Davidic monarchy and God’s promise to uphold it) is turned in an entirely new direction toward a covenant with a new servant-witness. God’s steadfast covenant promise is extended to a new “David,” the whole people of God called to inhabit and restore David’s city in Zion. An old promise forms a fresh summons and results in an appropriation of that promise by people many hundreds of years after the old promise was originally made.

Vss. 6-9 encourage the reader to seek after the God who has come near in this message of promise. John Goldingay points out the verb translated here as “seek” means more than “seeking an experience of God, but seeking God’s intervention in one’s life—or seeking God’s revelation for one’s life.” In this way the wicked and unrighteous are turned

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5 Goldingay, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40-55, 375.
toward something new, by God’s message of mercy and pardon (7). God’s thoughts and ways are very different from human thought and behavior (8-9), but God does not hold God’s thoughts to God’s self; God communicates with his beloved community (10-11). And in the 6th century BCE context, God promises that the whole creation will herald the exiles return to Zion in utter joy and in peace (12-13). Thus, the literary context of vs. 10-11 reveals that God’s former promise to David is extended in a covenant that has implications in the readers’ present. The implications are free, deliciously sustaining, pleasant, peaceful, and joyful – perhaps precisely the opposite experience from the one they have been enduring in exile. The prophet proclaims here what she has been telling from chapter 40, that God is not far away, but God is drawing near to speak to, to lead, to comfort and to defend the people. But will they respond? Will they appropriate this promise and make it their own? And if so, how?

This leads us to consider the simile of God’s Word as rain and snow in vss. 10-11.

D. The Sense and Reference of the Metaphor in Isaiah 55:10:11

The understanding of God’s Word in vss. 10 and 11 revolve around a single metaphoric device: *God’s Word is effective like water is effective*. Precipitation is relatively regular and has specific agricultural, personal, and economic consequences. We can examine this metaphor more thoroughly by means of its specific parts. I.A. Richards noted that in a metaphor the two ideas brought together to forge new meaning may be referred to as the tenor (the “‘general drift,’ the underlying idea which the metaphor expresses”) and the vehicle (“the basic analogy which is used to embody or carry the tenor”).

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resemblance between the tenor and the vehicle constitute the metaphor’s “ground,” which is what makes a metaphor, more or less, work.

In our simile, the vehicle of rain/snow (verse 10) carries the tenor of God’s Word (verse 11). What are the potential grounds in this comparison?

I. The first resemblance is the unseen, heavenly origin. God’s thoughts are as remote from ours as the heavens are from the earth (8-9). But that does not mean that God does not reveal her thought. We just cannot see its origin. The rain falls from the sky as pure grace from an unseen source. Like rain, the Word comes from God who may not be seen, but whose Word may be heard.

II. The second resemblance is descent or going forth; the Word “falls” or “goes forth” from heaven just as rain and snow proceed upon the earth.

These are the two grounds that may be explicitly identified in both the tenor and the vehicle of the passage. However, two other grounds are implied by the metaphorical vehicle and one is implied by the tenor. These require some gap-filling on the part of the reader:

III. A third resemblance is receptivity. Just as the earth receives the saturation of the rain, the implication is that addressees receive the Word. But, as noted, no hearers are mentioned in v. 11, nor is it made explicit whether such addressees might be a corporate body (i.e. a nation) or an individual.

IV. The fourth resemblance is hidden work. When the rain falls and waters the grain to produce germination, its work is hidden within the soil, but its effects are noticeable. Grain may be harvested; bread may be made; seed may be saved for the next crop. Similarly, the Word of God enters the hearers and
works mysteriously within their lives. The responses of addressees are observable and measurable.

V. The fifth resemblance is *divine intention*, which is made explicit in the tenor and not the vehicle. God’s Word is spoken with the intention of having effect. The rain and snow are divinely given with the intention of productivity and benefit to humanity.

In this metaphor, God’s Word (*dabar*) extends from speech through descent into reception and on to appropriation. One might ask, where does the Word begin and where does it end? Where does the divine action cease and the human response begin? Where does the promise of saturation end and the summons toward productivity and effectiveness begin? When one shouts into a canyon, often one can hear an echo, a reverberation well after the moment of speech. Is that effect still one’s own voice? Indeed, it is. Perhaps the point in Is. 55:10-11 is that there is a dynamic reverberation, a *retentissement*, between the spoken word and the effect that it produces and that the Word of God must not be identified simply with some static, defined content. *Rather God’s Word should be seen as a process, divinely-initiated but intimately hearer-involved.* As Claus Westermann comments: “For our Prophet the word is not primarily something with a content, but the instrument by means of which something is effected. God's word is a word that does things. When God speaks, something comes about. This view of the word dominates the whole of prophecy”

The question raised, then, is the freedom of the addressee. Whether defined corporately or individually, does the hearer actively participate in formulating the response to the Word, or does the hearer passively receive the Word/work of God and, like magic,

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produce results? The answer to this question will display a key difference between application (a response prescribed by an external force onto a passive recipient) and appropriation (a response which invites the hearer to participate in the process). For an answer, we must turn to a discussion of this passage’s role among theologies of the Word in 40-55 and beyond.

II. The role of the hearer of God’s Word

A. The Word of God as both mantic and moral

Alexander Rofé in a 1988 essay addresses the role of the hearer through an analysis of the Word of God as it is expressed through two different OT prophetic traditions. Rofé’s purpose is to situate 55:6-11 as a mediating text between these two theological understandings of the Word of God.

First, Rofé describes the mantic notion of prophecy. By mantic, Rofé intends the magical or supernatural understanding of prophecy as divination, whose roots lay in the northern Israelite tradition, in particular the Book of Kings, with the narratives about Ahijah, Jehu, Elijah, Elisha, and Jonah. These prophets all interpret historical events as the fulfillment of God’s sovereign Word: “…it overpowers treaties, armies, chariots, and horses; it motivates personal ambition; but its very nature it is not greatly influenced by human reactions.” After the fall of Samaria in the 8th century BCE, northern refugees exported this concept of God’s-Word-as-historical-fulfillment to Judah in the south. The Deuteronomistic

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9 Ibid., 248. Rofé notes that the first traces of this sort of theology in the south date from a couple of decades past the fall of Samaria in a story from 2 Kings 18-19.
redaction of history composed in Judah in the 6th and 7th centuries BCE reflects this firm emphasis on historical events as fulfillment of the divine Word, reaching its zenith in Deut. 18:21-22: “If the prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and the word does not come true, that word was not spoken by the Lord, the prophet has uttered it presumptuously.” Rofé sees DI as the prophet who adheres most strictly to the principle of word fulfillment, as the prophet states clearly in 40:8: “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” This principle is repeated in at least 10 speeches in chs. 40-48, almost all linked to the prophet’s polemic against idolatry.10 Yahweh is the only God because only Yahweh’s Word comes true as it was foretold. Additionally, the Word is infallible because, in its effective power, it reflects the power of God’s Word in creation, a frequent theme in DI. 11

Rofé contrasts this mantic or magical notion of prophecy with a moral/ethical function of prophecy which appeared toward the end of the monarchy. Growing out of other biblical sources such as prophetic psalms and speeches, this function of prophecy is evinced in the work of Amos, Hosea, Proto-Isaiah, and Micah, and reaches its zenith in Jeremiah where “the mantic function of prophecy has been subordinated to the moral one.”12 For instance, in the scene at the potter’s house in Jeremiah 18, the prophet reveals a God who makes decrees that may be changed according to the ethical response of the people. How the people freely appropriate God’s Word determines the quality of the relationship with God. Both Ezekiel (33:12-20) and Jonah exhibit similar prophetic functions, the latter being particularly pointed toward this difference. Jonah becomes angry when God changes the

divine mind at the repentance of Nineveh. This moral function of prophecy, while no less vigourous than the mantic, reveals a willingness on God’s part to act in concert with God’s human covenant partners rather than in utter dictatorial fashion.

Rofé then argues that 55:6-11 reflects a synthesis of these two positions mediated by the simile of the passage:

The Word of the Lord is likened to rain and snow coming down from heaven: their result is not water returning to the skies; rather their function is saturating the earth, impregnating it, and offering abundance—a chain of effects. So too the Word of the Lord: its consequence is not its fulfillment verbatim—event following word—it’s effect is what people are made to do, their repentance and inner transformation.13

B. The Word of God operates by influence and not by fiat

The Word of God works by influence, Rofé asserts, and not by fiat. How is this possible considering that most of the references to the Word in 40-54 are of the mantic type? Rofé posits that this passage could be the work of Trito-Isaiah whose redaction of Deutero-Isaiah corrects the purely mantic notion of the Word to reflect the historical experience of Israel. Not everything unfolded as smoothly as DI’s rhetoric would portray. The desert, in fact, did not blossom with cypress and myrtle instead of briars and thorns (Is. 55:13) nor did the landscape actually rise and fall to make their path straight (Is. 40). Nevertheless, the rhetoric of DI did indeed function to produce movement of exiles toward Zion. The Word was appropriated, but the promises of joy and peace which got them moving were translated into the need for ethical response to the hard work of nation-building upon arrival in Zion. The reader of Haggai and Zechariah will note the continuing difficulties of building temple and city that were faced by the communities which flowed together at the end of the 6th century BCE. What we should note is that the ethical response is predicated upon God’s

13 Ibid., 254–5. The author consequently aligns these verses with the theological programme of Trito-Isaiah (56–66) whose focus on repentance is thoroughgoing.
presence and God’s action. The summons to right living follows upon God’s promise as corollary. The rhetoric of 55:10-11 does not negate the mantic notion of prophecy, but sees it as the starting point for a relationship with its hearers that empowers their cooperation with the Word.

III. A Theology of God’s Word in DI

This blend of the mantic and moral understandings of God’s Word function together in 55:10-11 (and elsewhere in DI and TI) to fund a distinct theology of the Word of God. We believe that this theology is taken up in ways by Christian interpreters in the New Testament and the patristic period. While we will observe this influence later, let us first recognize three important themes that define the Word of God in DI and that will carry forward into the Christian era and that we believe deeply influence the formation of Christian preaching as appropriation: first, the Word of God is initiated by God and yet cooperatively fulfilled; second, the Word of God refers to the past but aims toward an open future; and third, the Word of God is seemingly weak yet surprisingly powerful.

A. The Word of God as God-Initiated and Cooperatively Fulfilled

Westermann notes the mantic and moral notions of prophecy in DI as well, but does not find the need for a more complex theory of redaction as does Rofé. For Westermann, the most important characteristic of the Word of God is that it is communication, speech from an “I” to a “thou” rather than a hypostasis working as an agent independent of God. First, Westermann sees 55:10-11 expressing the mantic certainty that what God’s Word proclaims will be fulfilled: “The particular word envisaged is the word of salvation in the form, promise or salvation or proclamation of the same, which runs through the whole of Deutero-Isaiah's
proclamation and forms its heart.”

Secondly, he sees the final outcome of God’s promise as a cooperative venture, surely initiated by God, but that is fulfilled jointly:

Editors often say that the present passage makes of the Word of God almost (or entirely) a hypostasis, an agency that brings something about by means of actions on its own part. This forgets the fact that the word of salvation spoken to Israel, the primary concern here, does not work automatically. It is spoken to men [sic] who have the power to accept it or refuse it. It is always an entirely personal word in which something happens between two persons. God’s word does not magically call a new state of salvation into being. The only way by which it effects what God designs it to do is the hearkening to, and acceptance of, the message of salvation…

The promises and the salvation of God are not magical, but rhetorical. For Westermann, as for Rofé, the history reveals this to be the case: “A great deal of what was said by Deutero-Isaiah, which means a great deal of what he proclaimed as the Word of God, was not appropriated in the way in which he said it would be. Israel’s return home was no triumphal procession through a desert transformed into a garden. In the matter of many of his utterances one can point a finger and say that this is not in fact what actually took place….”

But this history does not prove that there was no appropriation of the Word, which would most likely be the result if one adhered strongly to mantic notions. Rather, says Westermann, “When ascertainment of it is possible, the fulfillment may well be different, very different even, from what the prophet led people to expect. The only thing that is absolutely certain is that prophecy inevitably results in fulfillment. The word never returns void.”

Rofé indicates that when one compares DI’s description of the Word of God in 45:28 (“By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return…”) with the description in 55:11 (“so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty”) one may note the addition of the modifier “empty” (אֶבְדָה, regam) which

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 291.
17 Ibid., 290–1.
turns the theology completely around from a Word which will be precisely appropriated to one whose content is open, but not void. Behind this idea is a thorough-going affirmation of freedom: God is free to promise/summon; humanity is free to respond. God is free to speak, to act, to call; people are free to respond to this speech, yet the notion that they appropriate some meaning and act upon it is predicated on God’s initiative, which is, of course, the very nature of response.

John Goldingay in his 1997 essay, “Isaiah 40-55 in the 1990s,” finds this same tension in DI about the Word of God: “Isaiah 40-55 keep declaring…that the Word of God is all that counts and that everything depends on God, but it does so in such a way as to presuppose that everything depends on the audience’s response to it.” DI consistently offers a sense of comfort in Yahweh’s commitment to the community, and yet threateningly gripes about their obstinacy. As with Westermann, Goldingay notes that the reality of the appropriation of God’s Word in the exilic community never quite matches up to DI’s rhetoric: “The chapters portray an alternative world, using language designed to create before their hearers’ eyes and ears a world in which these hearers can live as the real world in such a way that it becomes the real world, but they fail. One wonders why the exilic Isaiah is not put to death as a false prophet…..”

DI seems to consider acts of faithful response as part of the Word of God as much as DI considers God’s initiating speech to be that Word. The Word is not only a specific content, but is also a “hearer-involved” process. And because it is a process, the interpretative work and the free appropriation of divine speech are also included as an

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19 Ibid.
integral part of the Word. The progress toward fulfillment in the addressee is what prevents the Word from returning reqam, empty. The hearers must take the Word, harvest it, bake their own bread, appropriate it into their own bodies, and seed their own fields. And yet their work is utterly dependent on the rain and is only possible because of it.

In this way, humanity is free to appropriate within certain narrative brackets. Only after God speaks through the prophet do the people have a fresh narrative universe which can make return even seem possible. After the devastation of Zion’s destruction, could they have ever imagined the possibility of a return? Only the possibility of return made plain by God in the narrative of DI can empower a probability that such a return might occur. Walter Brueggemann notes the liberating power of DI’s speech:

That transformative word is an incredible promise asserted against the reality of the empire…. But the purposes of Yahweh are never controlled by the empire. Everything for this poet hinges on Yahweh’s sovereign freedom…. Yahweh uses and disposes of empires to work his decree in relation to this exiled people. The decree prevails. Empires come and go in relation to it.\(^{20}\)

God is free to promise and free to summon Israel to respond and to return. God’s freedom exercised in narrative, literary forms unfolds a new world of freedom for Judah. God’s freedom sets them free to respond in faith (or not) and obedience (or not). An ethical response is opened up, made available to the hearers through the narrative force of God’s promise and summons.

**B. The Word of God Refers to History but Aims Toward an Open Future.**

As we have seen, the Word contains both God’s promises of presence and God’s action on Israel’s behalf (55:1-4) and also God’s summons to appropriate that promise in repentance and covenant-keeping (55:5-7). A temporal component reveals itself in the

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notions of promise and summons. God’s promises are oriented to the “the former things” of which DI so frequently speaks, to what God has done in the past (God as Creator, Exodus-redeemer, giver of the law, and as Zion’s judge.)\(^{21}\) Childs notes that 55:10-11 comes as a summary of *everything* that the prophet has said in the way of promise and summons:

Thus, it is completely fitting as a conclusion of the corpus of Second Isaiah that the prophet returns to the subject that undergirds his entire message. The history of the redemption and of the return of the exiles from Babylonian captivity, which involved the conquest of the false gods, the humiliation of Babylon. The role of Cyrus, and finally the call of the servant Israel, can finally best be described as the creation of the divine word working itself in accordance to the purpose of the sovereign creator of heaven and earth, the Holy One of Israel.\(^{22}\)

The appropriate response to this “raining” promise according the logic of the simile in 55:10, is receptivity (or faith) rendered in the present by acts of confession (55:7). On the other hand, the summons is oriented toward “new things,” a future which God is always *about* to do, but whose contours are only sketched and never completely narrated in 40-55: See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them” (42:9).\(^{23}\) Or, as we noted earlier, that future was not appropriated precisely according to DI’s vision. Rather, because God’s Word is a cooperative venture, Israel’s future was more open.

### C. The Word of God as Seemingly Weak yet Surprisingly Powerful

Another important aspect of the rain-to-grain simile in 55:10-11 is the surprising power of precipitation. The earth or the seed is often thought of as the powerful component in the process of agricultural growth. DI locates the most power, however, in the precipitation which seems weak, but without which the seed will not germinate and the soil

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\(^{22}\) Childs, *Isaiah*, 438.

\(^{23}\) See also 41:15; 43:19; 48:6; 62:2; 65:17; 66:22
will not produce. Anton Schoors in his form-critical study of DI outlines well the challenges which DI’s rhetoric must meet and overcome: “His salvific message meets with a double resistance on the part of his hearers. On the one hand, they are discouraged and they no longer believe in Yahwe’s power to redeem them. On the other hand, they are indignant at the fact that the prophet gives such a unique place to the pagan king Cyrus, whose salvific function he underlines twice with an oracle of election (xlv 1-7; xliii 5-9).”

24 We are not privy to the processes by which DI’s oracles of salvation were appropriated and responded to. Still, the mere fact that they were appropriated at all testifies to their generativity.

To Westermann, the prophet’s word can be more clearly noticed as God’s Word precisely because of its seeming weakness:

The special feature in the Word of God as the prophets proclaimed it was that it had nothing to safeguard it. It …rested solely on its having been transmitted to the messenger who, on this occasion and that, came on the scene with it. As such it might be doubted, disdained, even silenced. But the very fact that it was without safeguard, threw its character as an entirely personal word, and a word that came to a particular man [sic], into bolder relief than can be seen anywhere else than in prophecy, or at any other time.

25 Brueggemann also waxes homiletic about the subterranean power of God’s Word as a form of communicative precipitation:

Rain and snow are not phantoms but are real, forceful powers that produce something tangible in the earth, that is, growth and life and future. They water the earth, and the result, regularly and reliably, is that the earth is nourished, creation is sustained, and the food chain is maintained. Yahweh’s word of promise and summons is like that. It is not idle chatter or religious fantasy. It is substantive utterance carrying with it the full weight of Yahweh’s majestic rule. Snow and rain are not ineffective. Yahweh’s word is not empty verbiage; it will work! It will guarantee! It will produce!

26 As the promise of God’s presence and continuing action on Israel’s behalf was taken up into the exilic community’s imagination, these “mere” words clearly formed an empowering

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24 Schoors, I Am God Your Saviour., 295.


framework within which the nation could appropriate meaning, make some response, move toward Zion, and begin the hard work of restoration.

D. Summary of Themes

We may now thematically summarize the exegetical and historical-critical issues surrounding a theology of God’s Word in 55:10-11 by relating them to the aspects of the simile:

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<td>Prophetic Function</td>
<td>Mantic</td>
<td>Moral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Performance/Response</td>
<td>Confession of Faith</td>
<td>Empowered Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal</td>
<td>Often appeals to history and God's reliable action in the past</td>
<td>Seeks to open a future of relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Effects</td>
<td>Seems weak, hidden</td>
<td>Empowers response and produces visible results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IV. DI’s Word of God as a Type of Christian Preaching

We assert that these themes about the Word of God resulting from our exegetical and historical survey may contribute to the themes that shape reference to Jesus as the Word of God in the New Testament. DI’s theology of God’s Word seems to inform some of Jesus’ parabolic references to preaching and to the advent of God’s reign. We will take each of the categories in turn and discuss how various interpreters have read Isaiah 55:10-11 and discovered these same themes unfolding in the life and person of Jesus Christ and in Christian preaching. As we will see, Jesus himself is, in a sense, God’s embodied appropriation of God’s own Word. The gospel story which narrates the birth, life, ministry, passion, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and glorification of Jesus may be read as a set of
freely appropriated responses to the prophets of Hebrew Scriptures. Once again, but in a clearly definitive way, we see that the old prophetic promises are renewed in the way that Jesus surprisingly fulfills them, at least as far as New Testament interpreters see it.

A. The Sense and Reference of the Rain Metaphor in Isaiah 55:10:11

The clearest NT reference to a Word of God theology or Christology is John 1 in which Jesus is referred to as logos, a Greek word for “word.” Dabar and logos intersect at “word” but come from two different yet comparable linguistic conceptions of the mental life and communication. We will not explore these permutations here. It will suffice for our programme to indicate how a certain similar movement is indicated in John 1 as is Isaiah 55.

In our analysis of the rain metaphor in 55:10-11 we discovered that there were five “grounds” for a metaphoric connection between the vehicle of precipitation and tenor of divine speech. All of these elements are present in John 1 to describe the incarnation of Christ and may be seen in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heavenly origin</th>
<th>1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descent</td>
<td>9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptivity</td>
<td>11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hidden work</td>
<td>10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine intention</td>
<td>Word as God; John sent from God; recipients born of God, become children of God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

John Dahms finds numerous connections between the descent/ascent language of Isaiah 55 in the Septuagint and the motif of “coming from God” and “going to God” in John 13-17. Also, the “living water” discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John

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4 seems to refer to the early verses of Isaiah 55 and the invitation to “come to the waters.” Dahms points out, in particular, the connection between John 4:34 (Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work) and 55:11 (so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose…).\(^{28}\)

The motif of descent and ascent also appears in Paul’s Christological hymn from Philippians 2:

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Verses 5 through 8 of this confession reveal a trajectory from the cosmic down to the earthly. Jesus was “in form of God” but “humbled himself” to human form and even to death. Verses 9 through 11 portray his exaltation by God and glorification. While there is no direct quotation of Isaiah 55 here, there is an interesting reference to Is. 45:23, which is another dabar reference in DI: “By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’”

The shape of the gospel testimony about Jesus seems intimately connected to DI’s understanding of the Word of God. As these early writers sought to bring to language their confession about where Jesus came from and what was his work and where he went in his

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\(^{28}\) Ibid., 87.
ascension, perhaps Isaiah 55:10-11 stands behind those confessions as one important way of construing that testimony.

Patristic interpreters particularly recognize the descent-ascent motif in Isaiah 55 as descriptive of Jesus’ ministry and, perhaps, an influence upon the shape of the testimony and doctrine about Christ. In his commentary on Isaiah 55, Eusebius takes the opportunity to provide some clarity around Christological issues. Among some early theologians, a discussion seems to have blossomed as to whether Jesus was the Word spoken by God or was the speaker of the Word announcing God’s will and reign\textsuperscript{29}.

Eusebius argues from chapter 55 that the sense of the words used in the metaphor helps the reader clarify who is the speaker and who is it that is spoken. The rain and snow descends and makes the earth productive and then returns to God. This pattern of descent and ascent mirrors the incarnation and resurrection of Christ and, to Eusebius, clarifies the conundrum: “And, how can it be that the irresistible word is another than the one that is sent forth and goes down and does and accomplishes something and returns again to the one who sent it? For, these things clearly are in accord with the evangelical doctrines, in which God the Word is introduced and who was sent from the Father and fulfilled the dispensations among men [\textit{sic}] and ascended again to the Father.”\textsuperscript{30} For our purposes, what is to be noted here is not so much the Christological implication as the interpretive method Eusebius employs. Eusebius assigns importance to the exegetical sense of the words in the metaphor.

\textsuperscript{29} Tertullian in particular made a case for the latter approach: “More easily, therefore, may heaven and earth pass away— as also the law and the prophets— than that one tittle of the Lord’s words should fail. For, as says Isaiah: the word of our God shall stand for ever. [40:8] \textit{Since even then by Isaiah it was Christ, the Word and Spirit of the Creator}, who prophetically described John as the voice of one crying in the wilderness …, and in order that the \textit{kingdom of God might be announced by Christ}, He therefore purposely added the assurance that the elements would more easily pass away than His words fail; [emphasis mine]” \textsuperscript{29} Tertullian, \textit{Against Marcion, Book IV}, n.d., http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/03124.htm.

\textsuperscript{30} Eusebius., \textit{Werke: Der Jesajakommentar} (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1956), 347.
While he does not use the literal sense in terms of the history of the Babylonian exile,
Eusebius does use a literal sense in terms of the actual words of the biblical text to control the
interpretation, and he finds that Christ is both the Word that was spoken by God as well as
the appropriated form of that Word in the gospel stories of Jesus of Nazareth.

Aphrahat (270-345) finds a more fanciful, anagogical meaning in the “Word that goes
forth.” For him, the Word that does not return void is indeed Christ, but Christ at the second
coming who issues the Word of salvation and resurrection. Christ shall come down like rain
and snow and return back to God with the risen dead:

For with one word of summons He will cause all the ends (of the world) to hear, and all that are laid
(in the grave) shall leap forth and rise up; and no word shall return void to Him that sent it forth, but as
it is written in the Prophet Isaiah, who compares the word to rain and snow… For the rain and the
snow do not return to heaven, but accomplish in the earth the will of Him that sends them. So the word
that He shall send through His Christ, Who is Himself the Word and the Message, shall return to Him
with great power. For when He shall come and bring it, He shall come down like rain and snow, and
through Him all that is sown shall spring up and bear righteous fruit, and the word shall return to His
sender; but not in vain shall His going have been, but thus shall He say in the presence of His sender:
— Behold, I and the children that the Lord has given Me [Isaiah 8:18]. And this is the voice through
which the dead shall live. Concerning it our Redeemer testifies, saying: — The hour shall come when
even the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of Man and shall come forth from their tombs [John
5:25]; as it is written, In the beginning was the voice, that is the Word [John 1:1] Again He
said, The Word became a body and dwelt among us [John 1:14]. And this is that voice of God which
shall sound from on high and raise up all the dead.31

If Christ is the Word, the very voice of God, then the return of that Word to God is the
general resurrection of the dead. It might seem odd to say this since by Jesus’ own
resurrection he returned to God void of his children, empty-handed. Aphrahat has figured this
out, however. It seems to him that biblical resurrections always take two words instead of
one. Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus are both raised with two utterances by his count. Even
Ezekiel’s dry bones were knit together with one word and then enlivened by the Spirit with
another. Just so, Christ’s first coming was the first word of resurrection. His second coming
will rain down the final, fruitful word of resurrection upon the earth. Thus, we have hope as

we live between these two words. So, here, the Word is a type both for the idea of resurrection as a concept, the appropriation of that concept by Jesus, as well as our future appropriation of that second Word made possible by Christ.

What these interpretations make clear is that Isaiah 55:10-11 form one textual hinge between Old and New Testament. As we saw earlier, DI’s synthesis looks back to both mantic and moral functions of prophecy. At the same time, DI’s understanding of prophecy in the exilic period forms the lens through which to view prophecy in the New Testament, especially as that prophetic Word becomes embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. As Westermann states, “This view of the word [in Isaiah 55] dominates the whole of prophecy…. It is the basic view in the Old and the New Testament alike.” 32 The witness to Jesus does not supersede the Hebrew prophets; rather, the NT witnesses gather their understanding of Jesus through these same categories and themes. They recognized God’s Word in Jesus because they had heard Deutero-Isaiah and then witnessed (to one degree or another) how Jesus appropriated that divine speech.

We will now examine how Christian interpreters have interpreted Isaiah 55:10-11 and discovered similar themes as integral to their understanding of God’s Word as we discovered in our own exegetical work with the passage.

B. The Word of God as God-Initiated and Cooperatively Fulfilled

Christian interpreters refer to Christ as a form of human cooperation with God’s Word in two different ways, both of which move toward contemporary understandings of God’s Word as appropriation. First, patristic interpreters read Is. 55:10-11 and discover a

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way of thinking about the two-fold nature of Jesus Christ as both divine and human.

Secondly, throughout Christian history, interpreters have viewed Christian preaching as one mode of human involvement in the proclamation of the Word of God. In each of these understandings, we note the complicity of flesh in the process of communication between God and the world. Neither of these approaches precisely matches the earlier sense of human beings as recipients of the Word of God who co-direct its fulfillment. Nevertheless, the notion of human participation is present and highlights the role of the preacher as one who has heard the Word first before turning to proclaim it herself.

Jerome (347-420) offers both of these meanings of the efficacious Word of God “according to the anagogical sense”\(^{33}\) As one might expect, a Christological interpretation is offered. But it is quite unique. “… [T]he Word of the Lord … [is] he about whom it is written, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the word.’ God’s word does not return to him void, only through doing the will of his Father as he filled all things on account of which he had become embodied and reconciled the world to God.”\(^{34}\) Jerome, in a marvelous image, proceeds from Jesus’ divine origins to his human origins. The Word of God is spoken through human flesh: “He is the one who is said to proceed out of his mouth and out of the womb and vulva, not that God has bodily parts like that but so that we learn the nature of the Lord through our words.”\(^{35}\) If Jesus was the Word of God, then God’s mouth could be said to be Mary’s womb; she is the one who appropriates God’s Word and thus “speaks” the Word into human existence. Or rather, Jesus and Mary


\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.
together offer themselves as the mouth and Word of God. This figurative image is evocative and yet quite remote from the plain, exegetical sense of Isaiah’s words. However, a playful interaction unfolds between the text and Jerome’s theology that is creative and engaging.

Jerome is not content with a single interpretation, however, and continues with another interpretation that is a bit closer to the actual sense of Isaiah: that of the rain to which the Word is compared: “Or it indeed could be said that the word of gospel teaching may be called ‘rainstorms’ and the rain that the spiritual clouds pour over the good earth, where the truth of God has reached.”36 Words pouring forth like rain (“gospel teaching”) are what any preacher may appropriate and pour out in any place at any time. While DI would obviously never have intended to refer to preaching about Jesus, Jerome as a reader makes his own interpretive appropriation from his own historical situation and makes the connection between the prophet’s word and Christian preaching. Jerome appropriates God’s Word in his own context.

Theodoret of Cyrus (393-457) comments briefly on 55:10-11 and his remarks are noteworthy for their lack of Christological interpretation: “The rain and the snow, he says, are provided to the earth for the purpose of irrigation, so that the farmers gather the fruit of their labours, reaping the sheaves, and getting their food this way. Similarly, the word that I speak has a very great force and complete effectiveness: it accomplishes all my wishes.”37 I do not mean to say that Theodoret’s comments preclude a Christological interpretation, but that he simply does not offer such a reading as do his patristic predecessors. Rather, Theodoret comments on God’s spoken Word as a sort of agricultural process of irrigation,

36 Ibid.
growth, harvest, and consumption. Notably, he is as interested in human appropriation in bringing the irrigation to some useful fruition as he is in the gift of the water itself, so that, when he explains the first sentence by the second, he clarifies that “it accomplishes all my wishes” as human beings work to profit a harvest from this given Word.

No one states more plainly than Martin Luther that God speaks through human messengers in a very direct sort of way and that in preaching it is, in fact, God’s own voice, appropriated into human life, which is heard: “Mouth must be understood not only of the invisible mouth, but of the visible mouth. For the mouth of Paul, of the apostles and preachers, is called the mouth of God. Therefore He consoles us that although our word is persecuted and resisted, it will nevertheless achieve results, because it is the Word of the mouth of God.”³⁸ For Luther, there is little distance between the preacher and God, as long as the gospel (as Luther comprehends it) is being preached. Calvin, as well, sees human preachers as the “instruments” adopted by God to speak the Word: “The word goeth out of the mouth of God in such a manner that it likewise “goeth out of the mouth” of men [sic]; for God does not speak openly from heaven, but employs men [sic] as his instruments, that by their agency he may make known his will.”³⁹

Much critique can be (and has been) offered toward the “preacher-as-God’s-instrument” model for ministry and preaching. It certainly aligns the pastor with God in a way that can preserve a hierarchical model of preaching that does not reflect the cooperative nature of appropriation that is described in Isaiah 55:10-11. But models of Christian

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³⁹ John Calvin, Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah; (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 172.
preaching are not bound to preserve this idea in any way based on DI’s theology of God’s Word

C. The Word of God Refers to History but Aims Toward an Open Future.

Scottish divine, Ebenezer Henderson, in his 1857 Isaiah commentary strives to preserve a reading of 55:10-11 that comports with a sitz im leben in the exilic period. As such, he eschews a reading of the Word as a person or as Christ. Still, at the end, he allows that God’s effective Word cannot be confined to DI’s life setting:

By some, [dabar] has here been taken in a personal sense, as designating the Logos, of whom, according to such interpretation, Jehovah declares, that he should not return to heaven without accomplishing the work he had given him to do; but, as appears from the following verse, it is rather to be understood of the divine mandate given to Cyrus to liberate the captive Jews. Though thus special, however, in the present connexion, the declaration holds true of the Divine word universally.40

Another Scottish scholar, George Adam Smith in his 1890 commentary on 55:10-11 also attempts to refrain from Christological readings, but still cannot keep the text from bursting forth with juice in the present. Witness this fantastic paragraph in which the markets of Babylon seem to conflate into the urban blight of the burgeoning industrial revolution and lead from there out into the Scottish countryside:

And then comes a Passage which is grandly meant to make us feel the contrast or its scenery with the toll, the money-getting and the money-spending from which the chapter started. From all that sordid, barren, human strife in the markets or Babylon, we are led out to look at the boundless heavens…. We are led out to see the gentle fall of rain and snow that so easily maketh the earth to bring forth and bud, and give seed to the sower and bread to the eater and are told that it is a symbol of God's word, which we were called from our vain labours to obey; …Thus does the Prophet, in his own fashion, lead the starved worldly heart, that has sought in vain its fulness from its toil, through scenes of Nature, to that free omnipotent Grace, of which Nature's processes are the splendid sacraments.41


These passages reveal the future-orientation of God’s Word as the message rendered to 6th century Babylonian exiles is seen to unfold beyond the text’s boundaries and into our own day. The New Testament writers saw in Jesus a continuation of what God was doing (or saying) to the exiles. And Jesus was viewed as more than a continuation; Jesus was a definitive Word, thoroughly appropriated by human flesh, whose life and death seeded God’s own presence into the ground of human experience like a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying (John 12:24). The raising of that grain in the resurrection of Jesus, however, opens the history of Jesus up toward the future. This happens in many ways, but preaching has certainly been chief among them. Preaching is that Word of resurrection appropriated yet again.

The ambiguous character of Isaiah 40-55 leans into the present in such a way that it seems to push past the contemporary and become eschatological. Goldingay identifies the mysterious nature of DI: The addressees are uncertain (exiles in Babylon? refugees in Zion? Others in the diaspora?). What is the provenance of the author (Babylon, Judah, or elsewhere?) Yahweh provides comfort and yet calls someone (the Prophet, the community, Cyrus, who?) as a servant who suffers. Thus, a tremendous spectrum of interpretations has flowed through subsequent history, whose variety one might understand as a gift as much as an impediment: “…[T]he unclarity of the material sometimes derives from its nature, for it is capable of being allusive and ambiguous, designed to provoke thought rather than to render thought unnecessary.”42 Isaiah 40-55 is as deconstructive as it is constructive. Its deconstructive essence, thus, leads toward Christological reconstruction through the adoption of certain metaphorical stances. Jesus, as the Word made flesh, reconstructs the prophetic

texts and draws into himself the loose ends of Deutero-Isaiah’s metaphors. How does Christ do this? He appropriates the text, or rather, the gospel writers confess that they see Christ appropriating God’s Word.

Similarly, the canonical gospels are ambiguous as well. Who are their addressees? What is the provenance of their authors? Who is crucified? Have we who read the gospel not by faith also “been crucified with Christ?” The gospel narratives, like Isaiah, seem historical and past-referent, which they undoubtedly are, but they are not pre-empted by the past. For all of their reference to the past, they continue, like good fiction or poetry, to unfold worlds of reference in front of us, calling us to encounter God’s Word in our own day.

Christopher Seitz notes this open character when he says,

…[T]he final chapter of the Isaiah has not been written. More so than for the other prophetic collections, Isaiah remains open to the future, and it is doubtless for this reason that Isaiah is the most frequently cited Old Testament prophet in the New Testament. The church proclaimed that the trajectory of Messiah, so prominent in the Isaiah corpus, had reached its culmination in Jesus of Nazareth (Matt. 1:22 // Isa. 7:14). But the full restoration of Zion and the cosmos is never accomplished within Isaiah's own literary framework. So too, it remains a lively hope in the New Testament precisely because of the entrance into history of the one proclaimed Christ. The reign of the righteous Davidic scion was to usher in the eschatological age of peace and proper justice (Isa. 9:2-7; Isa. 11:6-9). This vision of Isaiah remains God's final will and purpose for the created order, a will and purpose not so much completed in Jesus Christ as sharpened and held out to the present community of faith, both in challenge and promise.

Isaiah and the Gospels alike have been preserved by the Church because of this quality of continual unfolding, that we meet and experience the personal address by God through God’s appropriated Word in our day, making promises to us where we are and summoning us into a future of cooperation. Where do we hear those promises, that address, and this summons?

We hear it in the language of Christian worship embodied in the sacraments and appropriated in God’s Word made humble flesh in the act of preaching.

43 Galatians 2:20.

44 Christopher R. Seitz, Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah (Fortress Press, 1988), 123.
D. The Word of God as Seemingly Weak yet Surprisingly Powerful

When one reads the parables of the kingdom in Mark 4, one sees the relationship between Jesus’ own understanding of the burgeoning reign of God and the grain aspects of the metaphor in 55:10. The parable of the four soils (4:3-20) narrates a kingdom where gospel seeds are sown into different qualities of human receptivity and only one type of soil is capable of working with the seed to produce abundant harvest; only one type of soil appropriates the seed/word in a manner that bears much fruit. What is being sown, according to Jesus in his interpretation of the parable? “ton logo,” The Word.\textsuperscript{45} The parable of the seed growing secretly (4:26-29) tells of a hidden seed that grows but the farmer “knows not how.” The earth, an analogue for humanity, produces of itself. The parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32) reveals the reign of God to be like a tiny and insignificant seed which germinates into a large plant. Each of these in its own way expresses the theme of a small hidden seed being revealed as very effective and highly productive. While not about rain per se, it certainly seems plausible for these parables to have at least been influenced by Isaiah 55’s motif of something seemingly weak being revealed as productively powerful.

When Martin Luther considers Isaiah 55:10-11, he frequently ruminates on how the Word of God, once it goes forth in preaching, is then hidden away in the human listener or even in the culture and seems to disappear or to be weak and ineffective like a tiny seed or rain that disappears into the ground. Then, a change is wrought in the person and the fruit of faith is inexplicably yielded in an external and visible manner:

...the Word seems so weak and foolish that there appears to be no strength in it. How can it be believed that all the power, victory, and triumph of God are in the word of a feeble human mouth? And so He comes to meet this scandal of the weak and the stubborn. For all the enemies say, ‘Do you really

think that everything depends on the Word? We must act, work and think.’ There the text confounds their thoughts. He does not say, ‘Our works and our thoughts do this,’ but ‘My Word.’

Isaiah is describing just this process through the rain and snow metaphor of 55:10-11: “Rain and snow are not useless, but they water the earth, giving seed to the sower. The rain can achieve everything for the earth. ‘So also My Word accomplishes everything.’ The effect is the same. For neither one is understood. Reason says ‘the strength belongs not to the rain and snow but to the earth.’ But when we experience the absence of rain, we see what the earth produces.”

All of the visible signs of the church and of faith are the result of this hidden inner work that germinates when the water of preaching meets the dormant seed of faith in God. Both are forms of God’s appropriated Word. The Holy Spirit in the preacher owns God’s Word to the point of public confession. The Holy Spirit in the hearer owns God’s Word to the point of their own confession and action. One’s confession, the outward workings of the church, even the outward and visible sacraments are for Luther wholly dependent upon this hidden inner work of the Holy Spirit.

In 1519, Luther wrote a pamphlet explaining the Lord’s Prayer to “simple laymen” in which he recognizes the priority of the inner reception of preaching and the Scriptures as the source of outward sacramental practice. In explaining the petition, “Give us this day our daily bread,” Luther states that the bread and the Word are both none other than Jesus Christ himself through preaching and the sacraments and states that the bread is given in a two-fold manner: first, outwardly, as actual bread received by the priest. Secondly, though, “Christ our bread is given us inwardly when taught by God himself. This is also a necessary part of the

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47 Ibid.
outward giving, for without it the outer mode of giving is futile.”\textsuperscript{48} The external bread is thoroughly dependent upon the internal bread, upon that faith, the Word that is hidden out of sight, but which cannot remain hidden but bear fruit: “But if the latter is properly carried out, then the inward way cannot remain merely external. God never permits his Word to go forth without leading to fruit, to appropriation. He himself is present and teaches inwardly that which he gives externally through the priest. In Isaiah 55 [:10-11] he says, ‘For as the rain waters the earth and makes it fruitful, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that for which I sent it.’ This is what creates true Christians, who know Christ and who deeply savor him.”\textsuperscript{49}

For Luther, the obscurity of God’s work is key because it preserves God’s freedom to act entirely apart from human systems and machinations. In the hiddenness of human hearts, if the preaching of a free and gracious God in Jesus Christ is allowed, faith is born and appropriated well outside ecclesial control. The church might seek to control the sacrament, the rules for its celebration, and who is and is not invited to participate. But no church can control what makes the sacrament effective: the preaching that leads to faith in Christ. To try to control that is like trying to catch all of the rain that falls on a lawn. Still, that preaching is itself an outward act and can seek to be brought “under management.” Thus, the need for courage in the face of persecution. Nevertheless, the liturgy, too, can share the Word of God as well as preaching does. If God's words are in the supper (“This is my body…”), then the supper is effective in the same way that preaching is: "But God's word accomplishes what is good times without number; indeed, it does all things: it produces and strengthens faith,

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 17:42:58.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
conquers sin, the devil, death, hell, and all evil; it makes us obedient to God, indeed, children and heirs; it glorifies God, it delights all angels and gladdens all creatures. But all this must also be in the Supper, because God’s work is in it [emphasis mine].” The image of God’s effective Word falling like rainwater upon the receptive earth evokes for Luther an image of a God free from human control and yet whose freedom falls upon human life from the Scriptures (as a written testimony about Christ), from preaching (the living mouth of God speaking in the present), and from Christ himself, both Word and Bread.

Similar to Luther, Calvin remarks on the rain metaphor and how weak and transitory rain seems to be. The Word, in the form of preaching, also seems weak, “as if it were suspended in the air and had no effect.” And yet rain “waters and fertilizes the earth.” How much more, then, can we have confidence in the Word which is “eternal, unchangeable, and incorruptible, and cannot, like the rain, vanish away.” Contra Luther, however, Calvin sees no warrant in this passage for an irresistible Word. Must the Word always have some effect, like magic? Does everyone who hears the Word appropriate it in the same way? No, they do not. Rather, Calvin reads the metaphor a bit differently and sees that the rain “giveth increase” so that “the labour of his servants is not unproductive” (emphasis mine). The rain does not magically produce a harvest, but empowers servants with grain that they may harvest. Further, he claims that Isaiah’s purpose here is to show that “God does not speak in vain or scatter his promises into the air, but that we shall actually receive the fruit of them,

51 Calvin, Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah; 171.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
provided that we do not prevent it by our unbelief.” The Word of God is not irresistible magic; rather it is both empowerment for appropriation and assurance of salvation by faith. In classical theological terms, the Word both justifies and sanctifies the believer.

V. The Word of God as Promise, Summons, and Appropriation

We believe that the theology of God’s Word in DI and particularly in 55:10-11 develops through centuries of interpretation into a Christology and then into a theology of both preaching and the sacraments. The metaphor about rain and snow, earth, sprouting, seed, and bread displays God’s Word in these three modes: promise, summons, and appropriation. Or better, these modes form a process that we call God’s Word. The Word of God is not merely that which God the Parent initiates via divine speech or action; the Word is not only God’s call to humanity in Jesus Christ; the Word of God also includes the co-operative process of sprouting and harvest, of “baking the bread” within human consciousness and the human body via the gift of the Holy Spirit. God’s Word is not only what God has done for us or what God calls us to; God’s Word is most effectively seen in the appropriation of God’s promise and summons to the point of confession and action, responses that may even reinterpret the promise and summons in new and surprising ways.

Even Jesus took the symbols of his own Jewish faith and embodied them freshly. The Passover meal, when passed through the hands of Jesus, reinterpreted all of the symbols of the Exodus from family to paschal lamb to liberation. Jesus’ baptism transforms the baptism of John (unto repentance) into a fundamentally different sign that takes into itself elements of blessing, circumcision, death and resurrection, etc. We are not calling on readers to devise new ritual interpretations of these sacraments. But we are claiming that God is “raining”

54 Ibid.
these elements of promise and summons upon us and inviting us to take them up into our own contemporary lives and sensibilities. We may embody Christ’s baptism in our own appropriation. We are privileged and empowered to appropriate Christ’s body and blood into our own hands.

Similarly, in preaching, the old, old, story of the biblical text (indeed the gift of human language itself) encounters God’s Spirit within us and preachers and as hearers. Just as the preacher is authorized and privileged to take, bless, break and give the text to those gathered, so also God’s Spirit, at work in the deep and hidden cataracts of our lives and consciousness takes that Word and blesses, breaks and gives it to the world through our appropriated action. Just as the rain and snow from heaven are taken up by the grain toward the end of flourishing, so also God’s Word may be taken up, by faith, into human minds and bodies toward the end of human flourishing where we see God’s Word enacted.

This understanding of God’s Word, then, is inherently sacramental; God’s Word comes to us from canonized, biblical texts that are thousands of years old and refer to God’s actions in the past through people of faith in the past. And yet their claim, and ours, is that we preserve these texts not as relics of eras bygone; the church preserves them for their capacity to present to us a new and open future whose contours are established by our own co-operation with God as we make the alien Word of God our own. We have seen that the church has often interpreted Isaiah 55:10-11 christologically, in particular through the Incarnation of Christ, the Word made flesh. But the enfleshment of God’s Word in Jesus Christ, while supreme, is not final; the incarnation of God’s Word in human life and flesh may happen, indeed must happen and does happen, over and over again, by grace.
Having examined the Biblical roots for a theology of God’s Word as appropriation, we now turn toward discovering a *practice* of God’s Word as appropriation that may be implemented in 21st century preaching and worship. The philosophy of Paul Ricoeur will outline *how* appropriation functions on the plane of the human imagination, moving reader/hearers of the bible toward embodied, sacramental response.
Chapter 2
Appropriation in the Hermeneutical Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur

I. Introduction

Chapter one described a theology of God’s Word in Deutero-Isaiah that New Testament communities and subsequent Christian interpreters connected to God’s work in Jesus Christ. As we have seen, this understanding of God’s Word is more than just thoughtful, insightful, or even doctrinal; it is inherently practical on both individual and corporate levels. The Word of God becomes flesh in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and it continues to become flesh as Christ’s Body, the Church, freely embodies divine intention by owning it via appropriation. We posit that this is what Deutero-Isaiah intends by saying that God’s Word will “succeed in the thing for which [God] sent it” (Isaiah 55:11d). God’s Word becomes successful as it moves along an arc from encountering a text to appropriating action.

What might it mean for preaching for words to be successful? What might be meant by “success?” We agree with Anthony Thistleton’s perspective that the Word of God, as Isaiah describes it, should not be viewed as an irresistibly forceful, military-style assault weapon, a grenade that, once-caught, must spew its effects on its passive recipients.1 Rather, DI describes a Word whose origins, like rain, are heavenly but whose effects are seen in the fruitful response and even collaboration of its recipients.

The type of success that DI suggests is akin to Paul Ricoeur’s notion of appropriation which he defines in this manner: “By ‘appropriation’ I understand this: that the interpretation of text culminates in the self interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself

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better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself.” In reading
(or in the case of sermons, listening) one is open, like soil, to receive the Word, but one must
also open the self up to the possibility of enlargement through the ideas in the text (or
sermon) itself.

We now give an analysis of an important shift in the thinking of Paul Ricoeur which
will help us understand the concept of appropriation in light of his hermeneutics. We will
begin with a brief discussion of Ricoeur’s life, oeuvre and programme. In particular, we will
attend to Ricoeur’s understanding of appropriation as a process of coming to embody the
concerns of a text to the point of acting upon it. Of prime concern for us will be an
examination of Ricoeur’s pivot from textual hermeneutics to a hermeneutics of action which
reflects the movement of his thought from the linguistic forms of metaphor and narrative
toward a concern for ethics on individual and corporate levels. For us, this shift mirrors the
preacher’s turning from the words of the “Good Book,” to the speaking of a “Good Word” in
contemporary hearing and, through appropriation, to the embodiment of that goodness in the
“Good Life” of both preacher and hearer. We posit that this “turn” from text to action
correlates with sermoncraft in two phases. First, from exegesis to preaching, the preacher
shifts from a consideration of the poetics of the text toward the live act of confession in
worship. Second, from experiencing the sermon to living out its implications (or not), the
hearer shifts from a consideration of the poetics of the sermon toward the live acts of
confession and ethics through the liturgy and beyond.

We will examine an essay by Paul Ricoeur for its connections to the homiletical craft.
Paul Ricoeur wrote “Imagination in Discourse and in Action” in 1978 as one of a group of

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essays that bridge his interests between a hermeneutics of the text and a hermeneutics of human action. The collection of essays in *Du Text á l’action (From Text to Action)* catalogs the “gradual reinscription of the theory of texts within the theory of action.”\(^3\) The second set of essays in this collection mark the turning of Ricoeur’s interest from *signum* to *res*, from language toward the worlds, the possibilities, and the actualities signified by language.

For Ricoeur the bridge which conveys his hermeneutical concerns from texts to action is the concept of imagination. The specific vehicle which carries us from one place to another on the bridge of imagination is concept of appropriation. The chapter is comprised of a close reading of the essay. In the succeeding chapter, we will connect Ricoeur’s thought to preaching through his hermeneutical categories of *encounter, suspension, and appropriation*. These categories overlap with what we have already considered as the cognates of the theological qualities of the Word of God: *promise, summons, and appropriation*.

A. *Ricoeur’s life, oeuvre and programme*

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) was born near Lyons, France.\(^4\) His parents having died while he was young, Ricoeur was raised by his paternal grandparents who were deeply committed Protestants in the Reformed tradition. Ricoeur and his sister were brought up into Christian faith and spent much time in Bible reading and going to church. He became interested in philosophy in high school and began to develop what would become a life-long interest: exploring the boundaries between philosophy and religious faith.

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\(^3\) Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, Continuum Impacts (Continuum, 2008), xi.

Ricoeur entered military service in the Second World War and spent five years in a prison camp in eastern Germany. As POWs, Ricoeur and his companions formed a “University of the Prison Camp” for academically inclined prisoners to teach and learn from each other. As texts in languages other than German were difficult to come by, Ricoeur undertook a translation of phenomenologist Edmund Husserl’s *Ideas* into French. Ricoeur would subsequently receive his PhD after the war for this effort. Ricoeur’s philosophical interests begin, as do those of many, with reflection on the human condition and how to understand the human will, particularly in the relationship between the mind and the body. His early major works (*Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary, Fallible Man, and the Symbolism of Evil*) were primarily concerned with the manner in which human consciousness could perceive and understand itself.

Lance Pape insightfully recognizes that “[t]he single most important thing to understand about Ricoeur’s body of work is his conviction that the quest to understand human existence must be mediated by language, symbol and story.”

Direct, Cartesian reflection on the self only led Ricoeur to frustration; the self is not transparent to the self. Rather, via a “long route” of interpretation of symbol, metaphor and narrative, Ricoeur came to consider language, particularly poetic language, as both the prime expression of human alienation and bondage and the prime conveyor of human possibility.

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5 Lance B. Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2013), 53. Pape’s treatment of Ricoeur’s thought as it impacts homiletics is the most comprehensive yet.

B. *The Word of God and Paul Ricoeur*

Why is Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy well-suited to our aims? Two general reasons obtain. Ricoeur’s work is both open to the idea of *faith* in God from an abstract point of view and also open to a faith that is *biblical* and mediated by texts and by preaching. First, Ricoeur, while carefully maintaining a certain methodological agnosticism in his philosophical work, was also a “listener to Christian preaching.” While he found that the dispelling of the “illusions” of God and religion by the “masters of suspicion” (in particular Nietzsche, Marx and Freud) could lead to atheism, hermeneutics could instead lead to faith, being practised as an art which meaningfully *interprets* the symbolic worlds of scripture not only as ideologically manipulative illusion, but as a mode of address which is preserved even beyond such critique, a word from God addressed to our situation from beyond our situation. Ricoeur found that the first naïvetés which these masters dismissed as unhealthy could instead proceed through critique to a new-found conviction, a second naïveté with the biblical texts, with the symbolic worlds of the Judeo-Christian mythos, and with the practice of Christianity as an embodiment of faithful confession toward that character with which the texts and myths are concerned: God.

Second, the notion of indirect interpretation, of the “detour” through texts, stories and symbols, is deeply respectful both of the biblical texts as a means by which humans speak of God, as a source of self-understanding via revelation *from* God, and also of preaching as a

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7 Paul Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 217. Full quotation: “Yet it is in terms of one certain presupposition that I stand in the position of a listener to Christian preaching: I assume that this speaking is meaningful, that it is worthy of consideration, and that examining it may accompany and guide the transfer from the text to life where it will verify itself fully.”

discourse both *about* God and *as* God.\(^9\) The detour through the symbolic function of words is a means to the end of *meaning*, of conviction, and ultimately of action. Ricoeur’s introduction to Don Ihde’s book on *Hermeneutic Phenomenology* sums this up quite well:

> The reflective philosophy to which I appeal is at the outset opposed to any philosophy of the Cartesian type based on the transparency of the ego to itself, and to all philosophy of the Fichtean type based on the self-positing of that ego. Today this mistrust is reinforced by the conviction that the understanding of the self is always indirect and proceeds from the interpretation of signs given outside me in culture and history and from the appropriation of the meaning of these signs. I would now dare to say that, in coming to understanding of signs inscribed in texts, the meaning rules and gives me a self. In short, the self of self-understanding is a gift of understanding itself and of the invitation from the meaning inscribed in the text ... and that meaning comes to the ego through the power of the word.\(^10\)

This paragraph of Ricoeur’s own reflection on his general approach to philosophy reveal compatibilities between our programme and Ricoeur’s oeuvre. Additionally, this paragraph leans toward some more specific connections with our work in chapter one and indicates Ricoeur as a good fit for our approach. The three signal emphases in chapter one each find rich reflections in Ricoeur’s work. In chapter one, we found in DI (indeed in many places in the Scriptures) a theology of God’s Word as *God-initiated and cooperatively fulfilled*. As Ricoeur states above, “coming to understanding of signs inscribed in texts” renders meaning, and that meaning “rules and gives me a self.” We name God into that process of revelation, but we can only do so because the texts have done it first: “naming God, before being an act of which I am capable, is what the texts of my predilection [i.e. the biblical texts] do when they escape from their authors, their redactional setting, and their first audience, when they deploy their world, when they poetically manifest and thereby reveal a world we might inhabit.”\(^11\) God’s Word has to do with us, but it originates *extra nos* and

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\(^11\) Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 223.
reveals a world which we did not create on our own but which we cooperate in making meaningful at the behest of the text.

This passage also addresses the second affirmation about the Word of God that it refers to history but aims toward an open future. As the prior quotation states and as we will see with a degree of depth in this ensuing chapters, the referential power of the text is not simply to that which was meaningful to its “first audience” or its author’s intention; the text also refers to that possible future, that world which we might yet inhabit: “What shows itself is each time [we read poetic texts] the proposing of a world, a world wherein I can project my ownmost possibilities.”\textsuperscript{12} Lastly, we also deduced that God’s Word is seemingly weak and yet surprisingly powerful. Ricoeur is insistent that language, as prone as it is to abuse and psychopathology, is also the primary pathway to possibility; metaphoric discourse is the passage through the hesitation of our will toward embodied appropriation of the concerns of the text.

C. Gerhard Ebeling as Anticipatory of Ricoeur.

Perhaps the most important reason why Ricoeur’s work is well-suited to our aims concerns the manner in which he helpfully extends the hermeneutical thought of a theologian whose thought is so foundational to preaching in the late twentieth century: Gerhard Ebeling.\textsuperscript{13} Entering Ricoeur’s thought through Ebeling will help us more easily follow some

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 222.

\textsuperscript{13} Ebeling began his university studies in Marburg with Bultmann and Heidegger. He also studied with Emil Brunner at the University of Zürich whom he succeeded as a professor of theology. Ebeling attended the underground seminary at Finkenwalde led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who sent him back to Zürich to prepare for teaching post-war. His 1938 doctoral thesis was on Luther’s hermeneutics. During the war, he was a minister in the Confessing Church in Berlin. After the war he alternated teaching at Zürich and Tübingen. While he has become most well-known for his theological work, Ebeling began his career as a church historian; most of his career was devoted to Luther studies, and his approach to Luther’s hermeneutics was a very fresh way of
threads through contemporary homiletics and will help us understand how Ricoeur’s thinking about appropriation functions as a necessary corrective to the New Homiletic. As we see it, Ebeling’s hermeneutics, so foundational to the New Homiletic, have faced criticism because they do not attend closely enough to the preacher’s and the hearers’ participation in the making of meaning. As we will see, Ebeling’s understanding of the word-event is really still as uni-directional as the propositional preaching which preceded the New Homiletic.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, his understanding of the word-event as a hearer-involved process, and particularly his category of appropriation will help to heal some of the problems with Ebeling’s hermeneutics.

In the 1963 essay, “Word of God and Hermeneutics,” Ebeling most clearly relates his thinking to the homiletical craft. Something akin to a homiletical theory emerges in that essay, and it is compelling reading: “the sermon as a sermon is not exposition of the text as past proclamation, but is itself proclamation in the present--and that means, then, that the sermon is EXECUTION of the text. It carries into execution the aim of the text. It is proclamation of what the text has proclaimed.”14 This essay is the most cited piece of Ebeling’s work regarding preaching.15

examining the reformer. Ebeling switched faculties from church history to systematic theology in 1954 while at Tübingen. This transition appears to mirror the trajectory of his thought from the consideration of Luther’s revolutionary place in the history of hermeneutics to his development of a full, contemporary theological programme of hermeneutics. This programme would come to be known in North America as “the New Hermeneutics.”


Two elements stand out in the context of Ebeling’s thought toward this definition of preaching and indicate how helpful Ebeling’s hermeneutics are for preaching. First, when Ebeling says “sermon” he explains that he means not simply the Sunday sermon of the normative worship service; he means “the pregnant sense of proclamation in general.” So, he is using “sermon” both literally and metaphorically. Second, he distances the concept “Word of God” from the Scriptures themselves by saying that the term most appropriately refers to an event, “something that happens…the movement from text to sermon.” The central question of his essay is how to get from text to sermon well, how to do the Word of God rightly. He states in essence that biblical interpreters and theologians have spent years wrestling with the text to unlock meaning. Ebeling proposes that what is at stake is not understanding the text, but understanding what the text is pointing to: “The primary phenomenon in the realm of understanding is not understanding of language, but understanding through language.” The homiletical task is that of “letting the text become God’s word again.” The direction of the hermeneutical task is reversed. Instead of bringing interpretive aids to the text to excavate some applicable meaning, the text applies itself to the reader, interpreting the reader according to its own word: “Thus the text by means of the sermon becomes a hermeneutic aid in the understanding of present experience. Where that happens radically, there true word is uttered, and that in fact means God’s Word.”

The biblical text is pointing to a God who acts not only in the world of the text, but is active

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16 Ebeling, Word and Faith, 311.
17 Ebeling, Word and Faith, 318.
18 Ebeling, Word and Faith, 329.
19 Ebeling, Word and Faith, 331.
in contemporary experience. This emphasis on the contemporary is a key component of appropriation and is a valuable contribution to the concept.

Ebeling’s language about the sermon (that the sermon is “proclamation in the present,” an “EXECUTION” of the text, that the sermon bears out “the aim of the text,” etc.) reveals that the Word of God is to come out, to become an event, what he calls a “Word-event” (Wortgeschehen).\(^{20}\) The biblical text itself is not God’s Word. It is the crystallized report of God’s action in the past. But the church continues to conserve the text because the aim of the biblical text is further proclamation with an ear open to the text in agreement with it and under appeal to it:

Scripture is not the Word per se, but becomes the Word again through proclamation. In the movement from text to proclamation, from written word to spoken word, it is not so much an exposition of a historical understanding of the text as past proclamation, but rather, it is proclamation in the present. Such an understanding of proclamation belies the radicality of Luther’s critique against the metaphysical realism of the Catholic Church: the Church is not a relic of past proclamation that remains present and eternally so, but rather it is involved in a history where a word which once came, must come again anew.\(^{21}\)

Here Ebeling leads us to understand preaching as an action, an embodied act of the preacher who attests to the testimony of the text about the Word of God so that the Word of God might be heard again. Again, Ebeling is helpful by recognizing how the preacher comes to testify to God’s action for herself. This looks very much like what Ricoeur will describe as appropriation from the point of view of the preacher.

However, much apt critique has been leveled at the New Hermeneutic’s influence on the New Homiletic in the past two decades, partly, we believe, because the New Hermeneutic failed to deeply appreciate the hearers’ role in creating meaning and in appropriating that meaning confessionally and ethically. David Lose and Lucy Rose offer two cutting critiques


toward the ways in which Ebeling’s hermeneutics influences homiletics. First, while Ebeling gave to preachers a fresh sense of the power of language, those preachers handled language in ways that were irresponsible. Language is indeed ontological, but it is also instrumental. People use language as a toolset in ways that are destructive and diminishing of human personhood. Scripture itself, in which Ebeling has tremendous confidence, is fallen. As a feminist scholar, Lucy Rose is particularly suspicious of any homiletic that would place too many eggs in the “language” basket. Second, Ebeling’s theology and its emphasis on eventfulness tends to produce a hierarchical gap between the preacher (as tour guides through Scripturally-based, ontologically significant experiences of the holy) and the congregation (as more or less passive recipients of the performative utterances of the clergy class into their emotional fields). In this way, such critics identify much of the “Old” Homiletic within the New Homiletic’s impressive new suit.

These important critiques are troubling because they strike at the heart of homiletics. Language, both the language of Scripture and the language used in sermons, is the preacher’s stock in trade, the medium vital for her to exercise the craft. If there can be little confidence in language (or, per Ebeling, the event of language) to bear revelation, to witness with some authenticity to both God’s presence and God’s action in the world, then we may as well pack it up and go home. Also worrisome is the question of pastoral authority for proclamation, that “gap” between preacher and congregants.

A third critique is apparent to us as well: Ebeling’s hermeneutics not only propose problems for homiletics but also for general philosophical hermeneutics. From its inception,

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23 Rose, Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church, 81.
the New Hermeneutic has had its critics. James Robinson brought the New Hermeneutic to the American theological scene through a collection of essays including some by Ebeling and Fuchs.\textsuperscript{24} Five years later, in 1969, Robert Kysar (a future teacher of Bible and homiletics at Emory University) offered his deduction that the New Hermeneutic, precisely because of its thorough dependence on the ontological nature of language, is thoroughly and only anthropology. Kysar sees the preoccupation with the word-event as a bid to discover the transcendent in ourselves and in our own language: “The incessant drive of the human spirit to achieve self-understanding, the drive which will not be thwarted without serious and even tragic effects, is so overpowering that one must speak of it not as one among other characteristics of personality, but as the transcendent, transhuman reality in our midst, i. e., as ‘Immanuel.’”\textsuperscript{25} Thus, from Kysar’s point of view, The New Hermeneutic fails \textit{theologically}.

According to Werner Jeanrond, Ebeling fails \textit{hermeneutically} as well. While generously honoring Ebeling for his contributions to protestant theology, his central critique is that Ebeling made his thought nearly irrelevant to general hermeneutics by subsuming the interpretive enterprise wholly in service to theological concerns.\textsuperscript{26} A quotation from Ebeling will illustrate:

\begin{quote}
The hermeneutical task can only consist of the fact that we devote ourselves to the service of the word-event in such a way that the word becomes truly word, and that it occurs as pure word in the fullness of its power. These are insights which grew completely out of the perception of the theological substance. But they include questions, suggestions, and understandings which can become fruitful for all hermeneutical efforts inclusive of the non-
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\textsuperscript{26} Werner G. Jeanrond, \textit{Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance} (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 156.
theological ones. It is part of the theologian's responsibility to make clear the non-theological relevance of the subject matter of theology.\(^2\)

Ebeling reversed the hermeneutical flow and claimed that the word-event, rooted as it in God’s self-expression brought to fruition at a new moment in history, was not to be interpreted as any common text. Rather, the word of God interprets us. And if we retain some method in the process it is to remove what obstacles we can from the word-event’s interpretation of humanity.\(^2\) The quotation above clearly reflects Ebeling’s belief that this hermeneutical approach can remain in conversation and be “fruitful for all hermeneutical efforts.” However, he also notes his own responsibility to make his theological hermeneutics relevant to a general audience. According to Jeanrond, this did not happen, and Ebeling’s linguistical hermeneutics lost valuable philosophical conversation partners.\(^2\) When philosophical hermeneutics and theological hermeneutics converse, there is an energy, a cross-fertilization that occurs that is energizing to both. This was the impetus behind Schleiermacher’s forming of a concept of general hermeneutics from literary and theological specializations: that a dialectic with other theories of interpretation would help keep theological and biblical interpretation relevant in the increasingly scientific age of modernity.\(^3\) It is somewhat ironic, then, that Ebeling, the one neo-orthodox theologian who really wanted to maintain a working relationship with philosophy, wound up closing the door on that conversation by claiming too much for the word-event. If Ebeling had been more critical of his own New Hermeneutic theology, then it might have withstood the postmodern


\(^2\) Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, 158.

\(^3\) Ibid., 49.
onslaught of Derrida, Foucault, Levinas and all those who are highly suspicious of language’s bid to directly and innocently reflect human being.

D. Ricoeur on Appropriation

Ricoeur was a reader of Ebeling and appreciated his programme while also finding it incomplete for some of the reasons we have just enumerated. In a couple of journal articles, Ricoeur deals directly with Ebeling’s hermeneutics and seeks to solve some of the issues.31 Ricoeur attempts to bridge the chasm by restoring a dialogue between the theological hermeneutics and general hermeneutics:

What we need now is a new framework which would allow us to connect Biblical hermeneutics to general hermeneutics conceived as the question of what is understanding in relation to text-explanation. It is the function of general hermeneutics to answer problems such as: What is a text? i.e., what is the relation between spoken and written language? What is the relation between explanation and understanding within the encompassing act of reading? What is the relation between a structural analysis and an existential appropriation? Such are the general problems of hermeneutics to which a Biblical hermeneutics has to be submitted. On the other hand, the problem of the specificity of Biblical hermeneutics is perfectly legitimate; but it could only be raised, in a consistent manner, against the background of a general hermeneutics. Questions like these would arise: What do we mean by the Kerygmatic kernel of ‘preaching’? What are the connections between faith and Word, between the character of ‘disclosure’ belonging to all religious texts and even to non-religious texts (tragedy, poetry, novels, etc.) and what is intended by the concept of revelation? What is the contribution of a general theory of discourse and of texts to the traditional notion of inspiration? All these classical problems may be renewed when related in some dialectical way to the topics and methods of a general hermeneutics.32

If a sermon is an “EXECUTION” of the biblical text in a word-event, Ricoeur here problematizes that execution thoroughly: What exactly is a text? What is the difference between speech and writing (and, thus, between the biblical text or the sermon manuscript and the spoken sermon)? At the heart of this paragraph rests the crucial question upon which

31 These articles remain untranslated into English and are only held by one North American library in microfilm form. I am relying on the translation of Michael Sohn in his PhD dissertation, “The Good of Recognition: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Religion in the Thought of Levinas and Ricoeur.”

the remainder of this chapter is built: “What is the relation between a structural analysis and an existential appropriation?”

When it comes to biblical interpretation as experienced in the moment of preaching, some form of this question has been key in the New Homiletic. One might frame this question methodologically: What is the relation between literary/historical critical methods and, perhaps, reader-response methods? Or as Paul Scott Wilson has posed it, what is the relation between Christian teaching and Christian proclamation?33 Hermeneutically, the former focuses on an explanation of a text; the latter focuses on the understanding of a text. But, Ricoeur’s language pushes us a bit farther past understanding as a mental exercise to an “existential appropriation” of the sense of the text. To own for oneself the matter of the text. Or “to understand oneself in front of the text.”34 One cannot dispose of the structural matters of the text; indeed they are the framework which exposes the text’s concerns. However, Ricoeur would say, the aim of the structures of the text is the appropriation of the text.

Might this be what Ebeling has in mind with sermons? That the “EXECUTION” of the text is both an explanation of the text and an aid to its understanding and appropriation? Ricoeur believes so. The key concept in Ebeling – Wortgeschehen, most often translated in English as “word-event” – is translated by Ricoeur into French as “le procès de la parole” – the process of the Word.35 Ricoeur writes of the process, reflecting Ebeling’s concerns, “The word came, but as it became text, it is a matter of converting constantly from text to the

33 Paul Scott Wilson, Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).
34 Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, 84.
word, and this is the process; the process which it still specifies frequently the movement from writing [écriture] to predication or from text to proclamation.”36 As we have noted earlier, for Ebeling, God’s Word, while certainly related to past events inscribed in the historical texts, only becomes the word for us through proclamation.

Ricoeur goes further, however. Michael Sohn notes that Ricoeur’s understanding of the process of the Word, however, “goes one step beyond Ebeling by shifting from text to action.”37 Sohn references an essay by Ricoeur, one of his Gifford lectures that he elected to leave out of the published form to preserve the wall that he erects between philosophy and theology.38 That essay is titled “The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures.”39 Ricoeur states there that one not only configures the biblical text via the process of reading; the text also transforms the self, calling out to the self and rendering the self responsive, capable of taking the deep risk of faith:

I am well aware that my belonging to this particular field of experience and language [Judeo-Christian faith] is first of all a biological, geographical, and cultural contingency. However, I also believe that it can be transformed into a freely assumed destiny by anyone who takes the path of wager and a risk. The risk is that of responding positively, in one way or another, to the nonconstraining call issuing from the symbolic field determined by the biblical canon....The wager corresponding to this risk involves a letting go of oneself....40

Paradoxically, Ricoeur is speaking of appropriation, of owning the text; but he does so in terms which indicate a being-owned-by the text, or, perhaps in Jesus’ terms, of losing one’s life in order to save it (Matthew 16:25). Critical approaches to the biblical texts are of great


37 Ibid., 172.

38 Ricoeur’s published Gifford lectures may be found in Paul Ricoeur, Oneself as Another (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

39 This essay was subsequently published in David Edward Aune and John McCarthy, eds., The Whole and Divided Self (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 1997).

value; reading with certain suspicions is helpful in unmasking the ideologies inherent within them along with their attendant abuses and phobias. Still, “[b]eyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.”

The texts are calling for response, for enfleshment, for appropriation beyond the spheres of consideration, reflection, and thoughtfulness. The texts mediate God’s call for action and embodied response – “nonconstrained” and “freely assumed.” Ricoeur carries us beyond Ebeling’s emphasis on event, without leaving it entirely behind. Ricoeur augments the idea of “event” by locating it as one pole in a dialectic along with the pole of “meaning”

The “process of the Word” as far as preaching goes, certainly “comes out” in events, but those events draw forth meaning in human life, something portable beyond the moment of experience and into the realm of human action. The “symbolic field” of the scriptures gives rise to more than thought; they call out, as God, for response.

Having introduced the reader to Ricoeur’s more general programme, we will now examine closely the manner in which Ricoeur finds the biblical text unfolding toward faithful action and response on the field of the imagination via the means of what he calls appropriation.

II. Analysis of “Imagination in Discourse and in Action”

Paul Ricoeur wrote “Imagination in Discourse and in Action” in 1978 as one of a group of essays that bridge his interests between a hermeneutics of the text and a hermeneutics of human action. The major work preceding this essay, La Métaphor Vive (The

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42 Ricoeur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, 133.
Rule of Metaphor - 1975), outlines Ricoeur’s thinking on the predicative impertinence of
metaphoric language and its role in the creation of possibility in the human imagination. The
major work appearing after this essay was his Temps et Récit (Time and Narrative - 1983) in
which Ricoeur observes the mimetic features of narrative which refigure human action. The
collection of essays in Du Text à L’action (From Text to Action) catalogs the “gradual
reinscription of the theory of texts within the theory of action.” The second set of essays in
this collection mark the turning of Ricoeur’s interest from signum to res, from language
toward the worlds, the possibilities, and the actualities signified by language.

Such a turning seems to correlate with the act of preaching. Each week, the preacher
opens the vast intertext that is the Bible in search of an ancient text that may be, in the
preaching event, reinscribed upon le corps actif of the listening church. The preacher
prompts the hearers to know and feel the “semantic shock” that occurs when the horizons of
the text are brought close to the horizons of the hearers, as individuals and as a body. The
preacher lives in hope that her words will be efficacious, will make a difference in the lives
of the hearers; and in the church, community, and world which they inhabit. The locus of that
shock is the human imagination which we often experience as an individual capacity.
Ricoeur’s work in the essay of our concern is to emphasize the social aspects of imagination
and how they are born out in certain “imaginative practices” that have significant political
and ethical implications. We will note the features of Ricoeur’s movement from text to action
along the arc of the social imaginary and seek out features in the trip from the biblical text to
imaginative practices in the church along a parallel arc. As a final aim, we will suggest
methods whereby preachers and hearers can experience sermons as sacramental vehicles
through which God acts to evoke confession, kindle conviction, and empower ethical action both as individuals and as a body.

A. Close Reading of “Imagination in Discourse and in Action”

Ricoeur opens his essay with a guiding question: “Can the concept of imagination, employed in a theory of metaphor centered on the notion of semantic innovation, be generalized beyond the sphere of discourse to which it originally belongs?” Ricoeur locates this question in a broader discussion of the poetics of the will, but this essay will focus on the single step from theory to practice as a test case for generalizing the concept of imagination. He proceeds in three parts. First, he defines the connection between semantic innovation and imagination specifically noting the aporias which rise from this definition. Second, he describes the transition of this definition from the theoretical to the practical field. Lastly, he sketches a notion of the “social imaginary” and, in particular, how the poles of ideology and utopia mediate a spectrum of imaginative practices. He states that he will consider the move from theory to practice a success if some of the same ambiguities residing in the theoretical description continue to keep house in the practice of the social imaginary.

Ricoeur outlines the paradoxes of modern theories of imagination and how they have potentially caused an eclipse of the philosophical investigation into human imagination. The concept image in western thought is complex and Ricoeur observes four uses of the

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43 Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, 164.

44 For the explanation of image in this section I draw on Ricoeur’s unpublished Lectures on Imagination edited and copywritten by George H. Taylor and Robert Sweeney. These lectures were given during Ricoeur’s tenure at the University of Chicago. The explanation of the concepts are a bit more clear in these lectures than in the essay.
term, two of which emphasize *reproducing* visual content, and two of which emphasize *producing* content never precisely seen before:

1) image means an image *of* something, a reproduction which makes present something that is absent and gives the viewer a “mental equivalent”.\(^{45}\) A photograph or *portrait* is an example of this sense of the image as reproductive;

2) image can mean “the arbitrary evocation of absent things” without the benefit of a physical support such as a photo.\(^{46}\) Our memories are often made up of these sorts of mental images or *traces*, and we can reproduce them, *if we want*;

3) images can mean *fictions* that we produce, things that are not only not present but also not existent, such as characters in a novel. This may also apply to our dreams. The difference between a fiction and a dream is our ability to bring to the dream image a critical level of belief. When we read novels, we have little trouble distinguishing our own world and the world of the text. However, we uncritically *believe* our dreams as we dream them; and

4) image can also mean *illusions* that we produce. In the pathological sense, this can mean hallucinations. Image in this sense lacks critical distance. Illusions are false for others and even for ourselves when we can gain the critical distance to reflect upon them.

So there are lots of complex ways that the concept of imagination, in both reproductive and productive modes, may be construed as a feature of visual perception.


\(^{46}\) Ibid.
i. Imagination in Discourse.

Ricoeur offers the concept of “metaphor” to a theory of imagination. “Instead of approaching the problem through visual perception and asking how one passes from perception to images, the theory of metaphor invites us to relate imagination to a certain use of language…as an aspect of semantic innovation.”47 For Ricoeur this means giving up the idea that the image is first connected to the sense of sight, a “scene” unfolding in our mental “theatres”; rather, images are first spoken; discourse is the true home of our abstract ideas, not our mental projectors.48 How is this possible? For Ricoeur, the bizarre use of predicates in the context of the sentence contains some predicative similarity (the “yes” of the metaphor). That similarity, though, is yoked to dissimilarity (the “no” of the metaphor).

To begin with, we ENCOUNTER the metaphor (or the narrative or the text…) and negotiate the “yeses” and the “nos”. For instance, when Shakespeare says that “All the world’s a stage”49 the dissimilarity is the most obvious component at first: No world-proscenium arch really exists to frame the boards upon which humanity enacts its various lives. The similarity gives the metaphor purchase by connecting implausible through the plausible. People, like theatrical characters, do enter and exit our lives in a drama of predecessors, contemporaries, and successors. The linguistic innovation itself gives birth to the visual connections through the canal of the similar: “In schematizing metaphorical attribution, imagination is diffused in all directions, reviving former experiences, awakening

47 Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, 167.
48 Ibid.
dormant memories, irrigating adjacent sensorial fields.” The imagination, in response to the semantic shock of a new metaphor, searches the warehouse of our sensorial experience for images, feelings, sounds, etc. to attach to the dissimilar, resolving the frustration experienced in the dissimilarity. Shakespeare goes on to extend the metaphor in the consequent monologue by comparing an individual human life to a seven-act play from birth to death.

Having heard the metaphor and understood its basic correspondences, we enter a mode of SUSPENSION. Ricoeur notes that, because of the necessity of negotiating the similarities and dissimilarities which create the “shock,” the image “introduces a note of suspension into the entire process, in short, a negative moment, thanks to which the entire process is placed within the dimension of the irreal.” By “negative,” Ricoeur does not intend “bad” or “evil.” Rather, the negative moment is a moment in which the real is suspended, held at bay in favour of a blank space, an empty state. The whole notion of the world-stage is not real; it does not exist in time and space; it is a fiction which unfolds a range of possibilities without our being actively involved in them. Imagination is that “free play of possibilities in a state of noninvolvement with respect to the world of perception or of action.” We do not directly see the full metaphoric images and reproduce them, nor must we act upon them having heard and perceived them. We may, however, freely play with the possibility of appropriating them in various ways. Still, Ricoeur’s point is that “we see images only insofar as we first hear them.”

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50 Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, 169.
51 Ibid., 170.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
Let us pause, then, to consider this effect in the case of Deutero-Isaiah. It is, in fact, a “semantic shock” which suggests the existence of a second Isaiah over against Isaiah of Jerusalem in chapters 1-39. The poetic imagery clearly changes in chapter 40 from tones of judgment to those of comfort, invitation, and a “new thing:”

1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.  
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins….  
11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

“God, the gentle, comforting shepherd” is a profoundly different metaphor for construing God’s presence and action with Jewish people, both in Babylon and in Jerusalem, than many of the prior statements of judgment against Judah. Comforting images of God are indeed present in Isaiah of Jerusalem (e.g., 9:2-7, 11:1-9, etc.). And, images of a judging, punishing God appear in DI (e.g. ch. 47), but these image are mainly directed not at Israel, but at Israel’s enemies and captors. The point here is that the poetry preceded the perception of the nation. These words form a semantic innovation which invites the readers to consider God acting in a new way, a different way.

ii. Imagination at the Crossroads of Theory and Practice

Ricoeur proceeds by connecting this theory of imagination as seen in narrative to a practice of imagination. The bridge between the two is the idea of reference. How is this possible? Since Wittgenstein, philosophy has well-understood that language does not maintain a one-to-one correspondence with reality. So how can the idea of linguistic reference be solid enough to carry a philosophy of imagination from theory to practice? For Ricoeur, one of the functions of imagination-qua-narrative is to suspend reality in what
Ricoeur calls a “neutralizing function.” In narrative our direct interest in the quotidian, in what we might control and manipulate, is temporarily abolished in favour of a second order of reference, the power of fiction to “redescribe reality.” By setting aside a prior description, we become open to new descriptions. Paradoxically, we forego our perceptions and thereby augment our vision and “remake reality.”

What narratives describe is human action. Narration, thus, schematizes human action into the imagination as a mimesis. When we read, we reproduce the action of the narrative in our minds. However, in addition to its mimetic function, imagination has a productive, projective function. One can imagine oneself acting in response to the human action narrated through story or history; we “try out different possible courses of action and … ‘play’ with possible practices.” To appropriate the matter of a narrative is to have first suspended the normal course of events in order to play with various construals of the ideas within the text in conjunction with our contemporary lives. Ricoeur notes that in this play period in which our concrete reality is suspended a new world or worlds are projected in front of us. The future is given new contours which reflect our APPROPRIATION of the concerns of the text. In navigating from imagination’s mimetic function to its projective function, we have turned from the past toward the future and “the project borrows the narrative’s structuring power and the narrative receives the project’s capacity for anticipating.”

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 171.
56 Ibid., 173.
58 Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, 173.
Consequently, the imagination also provides the “luminous clearing” to sort out our motivations, from personal desires to ethical obligations, from rules and customs to “intensely personal values.” In the suspension of imagination, we have room to consider not only the “what” of our potential action but the “why” that motivates it. Finally, imagination is the place of possibility; of “I can…”; the place where I might find the power to appropriate some action with my own mind and body. Having considered a project and its motivations, I may “impute my own power to myself, as the agent of my own action.”

Ricoeur summarizes this progression from narrative to action: “There is thus a progression starting from the simple schematization of my projects, leading through the figurability of my desires, and ending in the imaginative variations of ‘I can.’ This progression points toward the idea of imagination as the general function of developing practical possibilities that may be appropriated in human action. To be clear, the text has no special magic to render the reader capable of response; rather, what makes action possible is that the text offers a configuration that was not on offer prior to reading. The playful interaction of the text’s metaphorical horizon with the horizon of the reader’s prefigured life produces possibilities for appropriation that were simply not available before the act of reading. This pattern of

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 174.

61 One might observe Ricoeur’s Reformed background peeking through in this progression. John Calvin’s third use of the law seems similar to Ricoeur’s thinking here: “The law is like a mirror.” says Calvin, “In it we contemplate our weakness, then the iniquity arising from this, and finally the curse coming from both—just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face.” But for the person of faith, the law “moves” and “quickens” those who long to obey God: “…because we need not only teaching but also exhortation, the servant of God will also avail himself [sic] of this benefit of the law: by frequent meditation upon it to be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression” (John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 355–361. – IV.vii.7-12. In the law of God, we see ourselves as we really are, the beauty and the blemishes, and long for God’s beauty, truth and goodness. Ricoeur’s approach via imagination offers an existential version of Calvin’s thought. The texts of the bible form a sort of “mirror” in which the self is solicited from its present figuration toward a transfiguration of sorts.
ENCOUNTER, then playful SUSPENSION, then decision to act in APPROPRIATION is absolutely central to Ricoeur’s claim that human existence and the possibility of future action is mediated through symbols and narratives.  

Ricoeur proceeds to raise this rather individual function of imagination toward the level of a corporate imaginative practice.

Ricoeur’s next task is to establish how an individual concept of imagination might become generalized to other subjects. In other words, can a social group (or a whole society for that matter) appropriate certain imaginative practices in a manner similar to the way individuals appropriate actions in response to the texts and narratives that they encounter? He begins by exploring the historical experience in general, one’s experience of others and the world in time. He finds an analogical quality in our experience of history. Ricoeur draws on Husserl and Schutz and the phenomenological concept of paarung or coupling. Coupling is an effect of apperception, the quality whereby a human being compares new ideas to the store of ideas she already possesses to make sense of the new. Whenever other bodies come physically close to us, or when the idea of them “approaches” through the experience of an artifact of some sort, a “unity of similarity” is effected when they coincide. I partially transfer the meaning that my own body has for me to the body of the other. We experience the other not as a carbon copy of ourselves, but as one like me, embodied, sensible, and sensitive. I become aware of my ownmost place in history, time, but I can also, by analogy, empathetically imagine the bodies, thoughts, and experiences of others in their there-ness; in their own place in history.

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62 Ricoeur will proceed to augment these ideas and describe them as the threefold process of mimesis (prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration) in *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).


64 Beata Stawarska, *Between You and I: Dialogical Phenomenology* (Ohio University Press, 2009), 47.
Coupling is the analogical function that makes common action possible. Other people can and do act like I act. I can act as others do. Not only does coupling happen as an experience of bodies between me and my contemporaries, but also between the temporal fields between myself and my predecessors and successors. Thus, coupling makes possible the handing down of traditions. We imagine that other people, even those in remote times and places, can say “I” just as we can. Ricoeur cautions that this is not an inference; pairing is not a comparison between my experience of my own action, my observance of another’s action, and a consequent argument that an analogy exists between the two: “The analogy proceeds through the direct transfer of the signification, ‘I’…To say that you think as I do, that, like me, you experience pleasure and pain, is to be able to imagine what I would think and experience if I were in your place.” This imaginative transfer is to intersubjective experience what metaphor is to objective experience: a generator of new connections across temporal fields. Productive intersubjective imagination works to “keep alive all the types of mediations that form historical ties, and among these, the institutions that objectify social ties and ceaselessly transform the ‘us’ into the ‘them’.” This is the process whereby people come to appropriate and embody actions on a social level through time.

65 Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, 175.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 175–176.
68 Ricoeur’s analysis seems to focus on the seemingly positive aspects of intersubjectivity and coupling. The question could be asked as to whether Ricoeur is also accounting for how humans take up actions that are less than desirable or might be considered as evil. We will more deeply consider this question as we examine the poles of ideology and utopia. But for the moment, we ask the reader to consider coupling as neither bad, per se, nor good. But simply as a generator of possible action regardless of whether such actions might be thought good or ill. The judgment of the value of action is so dependent on one’s cultural prefiguration and the evaluation of the action in the context of the narrative being read that, at the current level of reflection, ethical evaluation is not possible. However, we are proceeding toward ethics in the next section.

69 Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, 176.
Ricoeur hints at a “Mr. Hyde” aspect of this more social concept of imagination. The analogical ties to our predecessors in history are imaginatively maintained through customs and traditions. However, the identity of our predecessors as real people fades into obscurity leaving only the institutions of bureaucracy which they created to codify the common action of certain times and people. Anonymity prevents intersubjectivity.

Ricoeur does not say this, but let us take as an example the drama in the North American social imaginary around the character of Santa Claus (remembering that a social imaginary is made up of those images, legends, myths, stories that groups tell through generations to define our cultural horizons and make corporate actions meaningful). We have a series of stories, myths, symbols, and images in our imaginary that define the character of the right jolly old elf who leaves presents for well-behaved children on Christmas morning. We have songs and movies and television specials that reinforce these ideas. Most children in North America are taught these myths from a very early age; they “play” with the ideas; they soon come to appropriate them and discover in themselves the deep desire to act “as if” they are real. In fact, many children come to believe that Santa is real. Parents, too, appropriate these symbols and narratives going to extreme lengths to preserve the illusion, teaching children that Christmas has always been “magic” in this way. It must seem magical to children that every single store in December, without exception, is imbued with the authority of Santa’s power. The truth, however, is that the origins of Santa Claus as we understand him are relatively recent, and his ubiquity has far more to do with market capitalism than benign altruism. But we as a society have appropriated a whole slew of practices around this character, and we collectively choose to ignore the plain fact that Santa, as we know him, is the symbol behind which so much of our North American economies lurks.
Ricoeur seems to draw an analogy between imagination in texts and actions in this way: Some metaphors through overuse become trivialized, then clichéd, and then die in terms of their ability to evoke a sense of semantic shock or fresh meaning. On the level of imagination as appropriated human action, bureaucracy is the dead metaphor of intersubjectivity. It is clichéd action, which “simulates a causal connection belonging to the order of things.”70 We often hear this as, “we’ve always done it this way.” Bureaucratic behaviors with obscure origins signal the end of the intersubjective, of the human ability to empathically analogize from one subject to another. “It is the task of the productive imagination,” Ricoeur writes, “to struggle against this terrifying entropy in human relations,” to maintain the difference between the way things are and the history of how they got that way.71 Imagination identifies and preserves the “analogy of the ego”; it critiques systems that mask their origins so that they may remain relevant to sentient human beings.72 What Ricoeur makes clear is that action on a social, intersubjective level may be appropriated for good or for ill.

iii. The Social Imaginary

Now we are fully on the plane of imagination as seen in human action on a social level. Ricoeur leaps into the realm of the social imaginary by describing the dialectic between ideology and utopia implied in the prior discussion of imaginative intersubjectivity. The poles of ideology and utopia are forms of appropriated social action and, for Ricoeur,

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
manifest in a “double ambiguity.”\textsuperscript{73} A polarity appears between ideology and utopia, and polarities also exist within each concept between constructive and destructive manifestations. Ricoeur, after Karl Mannheim, notes that imagination expresses itself in both of these ideas as “non-congruence with respect to historical and social reality.”\textsuperscript{74} Individuals and groups sometimes relate to social reality “in a mode other than that of immediate participation.”\textsuperscript{75} These modes, in each variety, are imaginative social expressions, such as the commonly held legends and symbols about which we have been thinking.

Within the notion of ideology, a spectrum of imaginative practice ranges from the healthy to the pathological. After Weber, Ricoeur notes that appropriated social action may be construed in terms of “meaningful behavior, mutually oriented and socially integrated.”\textsuperscript{76} This integrating feature is the root of ideology. Every group needs an image of itself, to ‘play itself’ by establishing symbols and rituals which reinforce this image. Pathology begins to emerge from this ‘play’ as it is ritualized, simplified, and stereotyped. When these representations are captured by the system of authority in society, then appropriated practices function as masks which try to hide the interests of the powerful in the system who makes excessive claims to legitimacy. Even the history of symbols and practices are hidden by authority in favor of a certain ‘always-was-ness’ that seems eternal. Thus, the illusion of power is bound to the very imaginative symbols and rituals which hold social life together. Within itself, ideology is not pathological but maintains within its own spectrum a certain

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 177.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 178.
pathological expression of distortion and dissimulation. But the healthiest expression of ideology imaginatively helps to define and symbolize the core values of a society or group in ways that can be put into practice together.

Utopia, on the other hand, is not only not anonymous; it is often attached to the very name of its inventor, especially considering that utopia is often expressed as a genre of literature. Utopia as a “non-place” can embrace widely divergent views in the act of positing an alternative to the calcified vision of ideology. For instance, if one wants to reject a certain ideological religious expression, one may appropriate actions that reflect either atheism or the “cultic festivity” of a different religion. As with ideology, Ricoeur wants to maintain an imaginative spectrum in the concept of utopia spanning from healthy to pathological appropriations. When utopia poses an “other” or a different manner of conceiving of social function, new possibilities unfold. One can never again assume that only one way of thinking about the issue exists:

The field of the possible now extends beyond that of the real...From ‘nowhere’ emerges the most formidable challenge to what-is. Utopia then appears, in its primitive core, as the exact counterpart of our initial concept of ideology, considered a function of social integration. Utopia, in counterpart to it, performs the function of social subversion.

Utopias “expose the undeclared surplus value of authority” and excess claims of legitimacy. They crack open the calcified shell of the “always-has-been” and reveal the structures of power which support it, all the while offering a new way of exercising power.

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77 Ibid.
78 So Ricoeur’s understanding about intersubjectivity is revealed to be a social strategy, often practiced beneath the level of consciousness, that is neither inherently virtuous nor evil. Intersubjectivity is an analogical method of the ego. See Ricoeur’s essay “Hegel and Husserl on Intersubjectivity” in Ricoeur, Paul. From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II. Continuum Impacts. Continuum, 2008, 221-238.
79 Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, 179.
80 Ibid., 180.
81 Ibid.
Ricoeur notes that utopias often express themselves in the forms of microcommunities such as monasteries, communes, and kibbutzim which establish new ways of appropriating social life that are contrary to the prevailing culture. While Ricoeur does not say it, we see these sorts of counter cultures as communities of suspension, places where the normal course of events is held at bay so that utopian ideas may be played with and different strategies for action based on those ideas are appropriated.

This imaginative incarnating of another way, another “place”, reveals the tension in utopia between its healthy and pathological appropriations. Imagination, in utopias, tend toward fantastic dreaming and preoccupation with perfect designs, “a logic of all or nothing” and a “disdain for intermediary stages.” Ricoeur finds that such a “flight into dreams” often expresses itself as a concern for the future while it actually masks a “nostalgia for a lost paradise” that likely never actually existed as a social space. While Ricoeur does not say so, we may imagine both peaceful and violent expressions of the pathological impatience of utopias, the former being seen in political and/or religious communities that starkly withdraw from broader cultural interaction (e.g. the Branch Davidians in Waco, TX), the latter being seen in violent revolutionary movements.

Ricoeur’s unique contribution is in recognizing healthy and constructive appropriations in both ideology and utopia, even to the point that “you cannot have one without the other.” The ideological direction of the social imaginary is toward “integration, repetition, reflection” and yet even in its most reduplicative modes can produce gaps of encounter with other narratives and subsequent suspensions that invite reflection about what

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82 Ibid., 181.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 182.
else might be. No ideology is so thoroughly constructed as to cover every social base. The utopian direction tends toward “wandering,” dreaming, and fantasizing. Still, in its quest to be borne out in human life, utopias move toward an integration into human action if only in trial.85

The dysfunctions in each mode are not original to their primitive, imaginative expressions. Distortion and dissimulation are not an inherent part of ideologies. Rather, the dysfunctions are grafted onto the integrative functions of imagination by those interested in harnessing the image to mask their power. Utopias tend toward delusional schizophrenia, not being able to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Still, such schizoid dysfunctions are not inherent to utopia but are the most pathological appropriation of it. Ricoeur goes on to say that perhaps we even need a bit of the pathology of one sense to offset the pathologies of the other: “who knows whether the illness is not at the same time the therapy?”86 We harness the power of each sense of imagination as we allow the opposite appropriation to perform its critical function: “As though, in order to cure the folly of utopia, we had to call upon the ‘healthy’ function of ideology, and as through the critique of ideologies could only be conducted by a consciousness capable of looking at itself from the perspective of ‘nowhere’.87

Now, we are taking the first steps onto the level of ethical evaluation. But we must be careful. Here we have Ricoeur in his philosophical mode quite apart from the theological. He is not sizing up the rightness or wrongness of any particular ideology or utopia in either healthy or pathological appropriations. He is simply noting how action becomes possible,

85 Ibid., 180.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 183.
first on the individual level via metaphor and narrative, then on the social level via intersubjectivity. Through the transmission of traditions and their solidification (ideology) or augmentation (utopia) people come to act in ways consonant with their belief. This is as true for the Nazi as for the Jew, for the abolitionist as for the slaveholder.

While not Ricoeur’s example, Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe is an interesting illustration. The book was an antislavery narrative whose descriptions participated in galvanizing the culture of the Northern United States for war. Beecher Stowe’s narrative of life in slavery subverted and exposed the predominant Southern narratives of slave life as false and revealed their true brutal character and the attendant power being held behind the facades. However, many writers in the South responded with countering novels (and even children’s books) affirming slavery as natural, biblical, and beneficial to the culture. Some Southern authors worked very hard to reduplicate the prevailing cultural sentiments by telling stories of the kindness of slave owners and how much better slave life was than freedom in the uncaring North. While we certainly stand at our own vantage today and assess these positions with moral clarity against the institution and practice of slavery, we may still see each side as proffering and retelling narratives of their respective traditions toward the eventual points of action in a great civil war. It is imaginable that each side could have assessed their points of view at that time as more “utopian” and their opponents as more “ideological,” which reveals the difficulty of ethical evaluation in the heated climate of the moral and ethical dilemma itself. The subsequent cooling effects of time have made quite clear the result beyond the simplicity of winners and losers. But when the issue burns in the

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88 In particular see Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas, Tex: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985). Also a website of the same name (but unrelated) containing a great volume of responses to Stowe’s novel may be found at [http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sitemap.html](http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sitemap.html) (Accessed March 15, 2014).
noonday sun, one person’s (and one culture’s) “health” may be viewed as another’s “pathology.”

As we proceed to make a theological transposition of Ricoeur’s philosophical observations here, we are thus pressed with a question that we are not entirely prepared to address in this thesis: in interpretation and hermeneutics, cannot one person/group’s “sin” be evaluated as another person/group’s “righteousness?” Cannot health and pathology be devilishly difficult to sort out? As much as it is difficult to do so, we believe our task here is to refrain from an issue-by-issue sorting out into the categories of health and sickness. To do so would inevitably find us choosing among the various appropriations of Christianity on offer and probably privileging our own. We have clear ideas about ethics and what constants or criteria might be used to judge what is good or bad, sinful or righteous. But, the field of our thesis is homiletics and not Christian ethics. Rather, our task is to note how biblical narratives fund human action that is, in some manner, an appropriation of the gospel. In the following chapter, we may belie our own ethical stances. We trust that the reader will view these as descriptive and not necessarily prescriptive. Ideology (and its attendant identity-integrating features) is not evil. Ricoeur is trying to convince us that ideology has both healthy and unhealthy manifestations. Conversely, utopia (and its attendant identity-subverting features) is not simply good. Rather, utopia, just as ideology, is simply an imaginative social strategy.

B. Conclusion and Summary

We now pause to note the similarities in the specific hermeneutics of Deutero-Isaiah and the more general hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. In chapter one, we saw that DI describes
God’s Word to humanity as a promise originating outside its addressees and yet works within its addressees to bear fruit whose contours are cooperatively determined. The addressees are free to respond to the Word however they will, but this is certain: that God’s Word of promise is always heard as a summons to the sympathetic listener. The promise of God, rooted in narratives of God’s actions in the past, encounter the listener(s) and summon them to cooperate with God toward a shared future.

We also saw that, while DI is addressing a specific situation, subsequent interpreters have generalized these same effects of God’s Word to claim that God’s promise is summoning the listener to appropriate and incarnate that Word in every age. The aim of God’s Word through the texts is effect, human reception, and appropriation.

Ricoeur’s general hermeneutics reveal significant connections. For Ricoeur, every text can be revelatory. DI’s hermeneutics are discovered to be a subset of the general hermeneutics of the imagination. Readers or listeners encounter a “text” (which can take a variety of forms from a simple metaphor to a much larger work); They suspend the normal course of events to play with the figures of the text. Every text is a summons, an invitation to the reader to refigure their lives in light of the text’s concerns. The listener’s imagination shifts from reproducing the text’s concerns in the mind to producing new possibilities for their own embodied action via appropriation. Ricoeur then reveals how this process of revelation happens on corporate and social levels as well.

We now return to the specific hermeneutics of Christianity and to God’s revelatory Word which always and everywhere is appropriated in the act of preaching and yet seeks to be appropriated in the lives of hearers. We will consider how encounter, suspension, and
appropriation function both on the level of sermon preparation and in Christian liturgy, which is the social imaginary in which preaching most often takes place.
Chapter 3  
Encounter, Suspension, and Appropriation in Preaching

We now turn to appropriate the hermeneutics of both DI and Paul Ricoeur. In fact, one might understand this chapter as a form of SUSPENSION, a free space in which we might “play around” with the various ideas that we have thus far encountered. We will begin to note some possibilities which may be appropriated by preachers. In this spirit, we hope that the reader will find what follows to be playfully suggestive rather than concretely definitive. We also hope that the reader understands that it is our thinking which most operative here and not Ricoeur’s. We have ENCOUNTERED his essay as a text and will now begin a process of merging its horizons with our concerns.

We organize our thinking around these three sermonic moments as aspects of God’s Word in preaching: encounter, suspension, and appropriation: 1) in the encounter with the text we are readers/hearers who open ourselves to the genres and content of the biblical texts; 2) suspension is that moment of hesitation in which we play with the possibilities posed in the encounter and 3) in appropriation we come to take up one or more of these imagined possibilities into the voice and/or body. These three moments, however, happen on the bridge of the imagination (on an individual level) or the social imaginary of liturgical worship (on the communal level). Thus we begin by appropriating Ricoeur’s thoughts on imagination into our scheme before proceeding.

I. The Preaching Imagination in Bible and Worship

Ricoeur augments the notion of imagination as a category in the sermon by releasing the concept of imagination from the reproduction of mental pictures toward the projection of
possible worlds that may be appropriated and acted upon. Ricoeur thus turns the imagination (and social imaginaries as well) from aesthetics toward ethics, from the poetics of the text toward the appropriation of the matter of the text. Everyone wants to preach imaginative sermons that are meaningful and that result in some change in the hearer toward some particular understanding or incarnation of the reign of God. By “imaginative,” our hunch is that most preachers are thinking in terms of the poetic forms of imagination and the productions of new metaphoric strains of meaning that are linguistic in nature. This type of sermonic imagination conforms with Ricoeur’s analysis of imagination in discourse and the manner in which fiction opens itineraries of action to us on the individual plane.

Additionally, however, Ricoeur informs our thinking about imagination in action on the social plane. The sermon is not only a discourse event or linguistic exercise. If it were, then the preacher could just as well read the sermon from the page or even print it in the bulletin while the congregation simply read it silently to themselves. But sermons are not just read; they are preached; they are enacted. The sermon is an event of action in the context of worship. Ricoeur wants us to see that the poetic, metaphoric imagination intersects with the social imaginary and has ethical and even political consequences. Most preachers want sermons to be effective: to spawn action, difference, and change in the lives of hearers. Ricoeur’s thought invites reflection on how the sermon opens up possible worlds and also spurs the listener from mental choice through bodily participation in their own confessions and good actions inspired by the goodness of God.

Now, we will pull at the threads of a sermon to see how imagination functions as the “luminous clearing” within which past experiences imply future expectations that impinge on the present on both the individual and social level. We will follow Ricoeur’s trajectory by
first considering language as a source of imagination for preaching via metaphor and narrative, We could also pair Ricoeur’s description with our analysis of God’s Word in chapter one: First, the listener/preacher ENCOUNTERS divine promise in the poetics of the text/sermon; next, they find themselves SUSPENDED in reflection and summoned toward a set of possible responses; last, they choose a response and APPROPRIATE an action as a result of the poetic encounter. Or not. One choice, of course, is not to act at all. But that is not particularly a choice for the preacher who wishes to continue her authorized work among the people (not to mention collecting a paycheck!).

The sermon is shaped from encounter to appropriation, from text to action, from a public/private reading of the text toward a sermon preached through a body. Ideally, many collaborators will weigh in along the way. Still, the preacher is the one who will take the influence of others and make certain choices about what to say. In this way, the event of the sermon may be viewed as a model for the figuration of all hearers. The sermon IS appropriation of God’s Word in ritual form. The preacher encounters the text, is presented with a variety of possible futures, chooses from among them for the purpose of public confession, and then bodily performs this confession through a sermon that has significant ethical implications. The hearer of the sermon will also encounter the text/sermon, will be presented with possible futures, will find it necessary to make choices toward some future, and will bring that choice (or not) into bodily performance in worship and in the world. The sermon is a key aspect of ritual performance in worship and an integral part of the spiritual formation and reformation of the church. The sermon teaches how to confess and how to ethically act in response to that confession. The sermon also proclaims a God whose actions today inspire this embodied response. So, the sermon is an act of understanding the biblical
text, “not by imposing upon the text our finite capacity for understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self.”

This reception of the self, says Ricoeur, is appropriation.

Ricoeur augments the imagination in another direction as well: from an individual mental experience to a social one. Many homiletical theories since the 1960s focus on the concept of imagination in preaching. But often, preachers only consider imagination in the poetic sense of an individual experience of narrative and metaphor. What Ricoeur invites us to consider is how sermons also draw upon and seek to influence the social imaginary as well. The action of preaching or the action into which the sermon invites its listeners is not only confessional; one does not simply have an aesthetic experience of the imagination. Those images mean something socially when they are enacted in the sermon or as a result of the sermon. The sermon and the practical responses to it are ethical as well as confessional. Ricoeur’s axis between ideology and utopia give us an additional imaginative lens through which to think about preaching on each of the three levels of encounter, suspension, and appropriation.

II. Encounter, Suspension, and Appropriation in Preaching on Individual and Social Planes

We will begin each of the following analyses with a brief theological transposition so that we may claim for preaching a thorough focus on God. Ricoeur, throughout his lengthy career, maintained a substantial distance between his philosophical hermeneutics and theology. While many have noted affinities between them, enticed by the bridge of his

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1 Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” in From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, Continuum Impacts (Continuum, 2008), 84.
biblical hermeneutics, he still maintains his careful distance. Therefore, making a sort of translation of these philosophical ideas into the theological field is left to us. We will develop some Trinitarian implications of Ricoeur’s thinking about imagination. How does imagination rooted in discourse intersect with a doctrine of the Trinity conceived as the practice of God or, for our purposes, the Word of God? Following this, we will explore each moment of imagination first in the context of discourse and then in the context of social action.

In what follows, we are tracing a linear model of sermon development which proceeds from private encounter with the text to the public proclamation of the sermon. One could also explore collaborative techniques; one could begin one’s reflection on the coming sermon while participating in some act of ministry or social engagement. Experience prefigures personality and stokes the imagination for the textual encounter. However, this thesis attempts to provide assistance to preachers who normatively 1) include reflection on a biblical text as an integral part of the sermon; and 2) preach as one voice in the midst of a congregation. Regardless of the various methods one might employ to begin sermon reflection, one will always encounter the text in some rigorous way and one will always wind up preaching in a ritual act of proclamation. Additionally, since this model is intended to be considered for its heuristic value, the reader should not assume that we think that the biblical text is being unfolded on the blank slates of our homiletical imagination. We believe that this process, while it appears to be linear, is actually cyclical. Our experience of past actions informs our understandings of biblical texts in the same ways that our “effective histories” shape our ontological experiences.² Still, we isolate this portion of the cycle for the purposes

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² Hans Georg Gadamer coined the term *Wirkungsgeschichte* often translated as “effective history” in his claim that understanding is always effected by the traditions we inherit and our own historical experience.
of considering the effects of the human imagination. We very much agree with Ricoeur when
he states, in a dialogue with Richard Kearney, that, “[t]he referent of narration, namely
human action, is never raw or immediate reality but an action which has been symbolized
over and over again”\textsuperscript{3}

A. Encountering the Biblical Text

We use the term “encounter” with intention. To encounter something or someone is to
meet them face-to-face (countenance-to-countenance). Another way of thinking of the term is
from its Latin root, *incontrare*: in + contra (against). To encounter the text is to face it, to
stand opposite it, to feel one’s distance from it, and then, perhaps, to face up to it. We enter
the “strange new world within the Bible” as Karl Barth called it and deal with the things that
the text deals with.\textsuperscript{4} We decrease our distance from the concerns of the text. In this way,
encountering the biblical text is largely a “first order of reference” experience; we decipher
the text’s “codes” and seek to understand its structures and correspondences, its genres and
histories, and its literal references.

i. Encounter and the Theological Imagination: God, the Creator

By offering a definition of imagination that is not restricted to our perception of
images, Ricoeur’s philosophy of metaphorical imagination offers a sort of “givenness” to the
concept that meshes well with traditional concepts of God and God’s action. Ricoeur himself,


\textsuperscript{4} Karl Barth, “The Strange New World within the Bible,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*
(Pilgrim Press, 1928).
in his reflections on the biblical canon and the varied genres of Christian confession contained therein, asserts this idea. Through narrative, metaphor and symbols, imagination, even on a psychological level, is not restricted to the sphere of one’s own experience. Rather, fuel for the imagination comes by encounter with metaphors outside one’s own individual life. The biblical texts as founding narratives and descriptions of the God-who-acts form a prevenient source for the imagination. We did not have to write them; they are given to us; they will remain when we are dead and gone; for millennia these texts have stoked the human imagination with the possibility of a world with God. In this way, the biblical texts, with their varied and even conflicting descriptions of God’s actions, stand in for God. They certainly are not God, and yet they alone speak of God who was, is, and may yet be. As a source for imagination in our own day, we might associate the texts with the attribute most commonly ascribed to God the Father/Parent in Trinitarian Christian theology: Creator.

In Christian preaching from a Ricoeurian perspective, the biblical texts form the primary creative force stoking the imagination and fueling possibility. The God-who-acts in these texts, the God who created and continues to create, may be seen as creating in the present within the imagination of preacher and congregation through the schematizing of

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5 In his essay on “Philosophy and Religious Language,” Ricoeur applies several of his more philosophical concepts about discourse and narrativity to the biblical texts. Thinking of the narrative genre, in particular, Ricoeur says, “Not just any theology whatsoever can be tied to the narrative form, but only a theology that proclaims Yahweh to be the grand actor of a history of deliverance.” See Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” in Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 40. Additionally, his essay on “The Bible and the Imagination” affirms the application of his thinking about imagination to the biblical field. He clearly states at the opening of that essay that one of his aims is “to see in the reading of a text such as the Bible a creative operation unceasingly employed in decontextualizing its meaning and recontextualizing it in today’s Sitz-im-Leben....the act of reading realizes the union of fiction and redescription that characterizes the imagination...” (Paul Ricoeur, “The Bible and the Imagination,” in Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 145.) We assume that these two assumptions, that 1) the Bible persists as a narrative of a God who acts in history, and 2) that reading the Bible is an imaginative act of recontextualizing its meaning thus permits us to speak of the text as a source of prevenient grace, those acts of God which precede us and yet are done with us in mind.
God’s action in biblical narratives. The human imagination begins to resituate the presence and action of God from the past into the present and future.

For Ricoeur, the language of the biblical text (and any poetic text) has two orders of reference. The texts first refer to people, politics and situations far distant from our own time. This literal level of description comprise the texts internal set of correspondences that situates the text’s internal structure and render it sensible. In a biblical gospel, for instance, as we read we become familiar with certain characters, settings, and events. The first order of reference then is to that set of features that correspond with Palestine in the Hellenistic world of the first century CE. Our imaginations seek to reproduce something of the narration which we read in the gospel.

However, another order of reference is also inherent to the text. When the biblical text is brought close to our own lives as a source for meaning, frustration ensues, similar to the frustration one experiences with a metaphor that we described earlier. We, the readers, search for contemporary correspondences with the world described by the text and we recontextualize the narrative using it as a sort of model for potential action. We do more than reproduce the narrative; we invent and produce new correspondences that include the stuff of our contemporary experience. This is the difference between the “reproductive imagination” and the “productive imagination.” Lance Pape describes well Ricoeur’s thought about this creative, “heuristic” function of the text:

The heuristic power of purely linguistic scientific models provides a compelling analogue to Ricoeur’s claim that metaphorical redescription (also a purely linguistic phenomenon) holds the power to disclose, to refer, to point toward what was not otherwise available, there is a real sense in which the “seeing as” of the model’s (or metaphor’s) redescription is simply seeing what is. The invented way of talking is the only access to the reality described, and so it makes sense to say that what is “invented” as a way of talking points toward something newly “discovered.” This is what Ricoeur means when he suggests that our very conception of reality is thrown into question by living metaphor. The semantic innovation (invention) has the surprising effect of expanding our world (discovery).

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6 Pape, The Scandal of Having Something to Say, 66.
So, is it possible that this second order of the reference of the biblical text, as Ricoeur calls it, might be understood as the continuing creative gift of God into our contemporary experience, rendering our perception imbued with the possibility of seeing God’s action in our own time? And if we can see creation in such contemporary, practical terms, we might also see revelation less as a doctrine oriented entirely toward the past (scripture and tradition) and more as a contemporary practice of God through these sources from our past. This is precisely Ricoeur’s point as he applies his hermeneutic literary theory to the notion of both biblical and general revelation:

“the poetic function incarnates a concept of truth that escapes the definition by adequation as well as the criteria of falsification and verification. Here truth no longer means verification, but manifestation, i.e., letting what shows itself be. What shows itself is in each instance a proposed world, a world I may inhabit and wherein I can project my ownmost possibilities. It is in this sense of manifestation that language in its poetic function is a vehicle of revelation….This new analogy invites us to place the originary expressions of biblical faith under the sign of the poetic function of language; not to deprive them of any referent, but to put them under the law of split reference that characterizes the poetic function. Religious discourse is poetic in all the senses we have named. Being written down as scripture removes it from the finite horizon of its authors and its first audience. The style of its literary genres gives it the externality of a work. And the intended implicit reference of each text opens onto a world, the biblical world, or rather the multiple worlds unfolded before the book by its narration, prophecy, prescriptions, wisdom, and hymns. The proposed world that in biblical language is called a new creation, a new Covenant, the Kingdom of God, is the "issue" of the biblical text unfolded in front of this text."

“Revelation” might thus be understood as a theological cognate to Ricoeur’s “productive imagination.”

**ii. Encountering the Metaphorical Imagination in the Biblical Text**

What we mean by “metaphorical imagination” is akin to that gift of Ricoeur to the concept of imagination as visual image: the idea that imagination is first a feature of language rather than sight. As the “impertinent predications” in the text (and between various

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texts and genres in the canon) are brought close to contemporary experience, new opportunities for meaning are posed to the reader. But they are borne out of the encounter with the “letter” of the biblical text. So, the first approach to the sermon of the immediate future is the paradoxical step toward the biblical texts of the past. So by “imagination in the biblical text” what we primarily intend is that set of correspondences within the structures of the text itself apart from how the preacher will recontextualize them. That will come in the next part.

Once a text for preaching is chosen it is opened for engagement. The biblical text is a discourse, which in Ricoeur’s famous definition is when “someone says something to someone about something.” For Ricoeur, what distinguishes biblical texts from other important texts is that they are, ultimately, about God, about this Character in the text that is referred to by the name, God. Preaching, then, begins by encountering a text whose primary level of reference is to God, specifically a God who is claimed to have acted in certain ways in history with the other characters named in the various biblical genres.

Historical-critical scholarship about the text is helpful at this point of exegesis. These kinds of methods assist us to hear what the text really says through various forms of translation to the preacher. The preacher needs to hear with clarity the different correspondences in what Ricoeur calls the first order of reference of the text. Even at this level, the text offers us certain mimetic features. The various characters and voices often act and speak like we act and speak. Particularly in the narrative, psalmic, prophetic, and apocalyptic genres, biblical texts function like fictions, not in the sense of being a-historical,

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9 Ricoeur, “The Bible and the Imagination,” 220–221.
but in the Ricoeurian sense of being capable of redescribing our reality.\textsuperscript{10} We identify with various characters, with their actions and their voices, and in particular we hear about another reality, one from the past that is not our past but like our past, that refers to the actions, character, and voice of God. As the words unfold so do the images that we associate with them. Learning about the sitz-im-leben of these narratives helps us to understand what the texts are trying to say and what their authors were attempting to claim in their testimonies about God.

Literary criticisms are of considerable value here, as well. By taking the world of the chosen text and placing it in dialogue with related images within its book, its genre, and the canon, preachers can develop a sense of the complexity and dialectic of images in the whole. For instance, reading the Pentecost story (Acts 2:1-21) solely in the context of Luke-Acts open a certain set of important imaginative trajectories. However, reading the story as a reversal of the Tower of Babel story from Genesis 11 will open a whole new layer of itineraries.

Historical, narrative, and literary features are helpful as they fuel the reproductive imagination toward a certain schema of the text, a certain “emplotment,” as Ricoeur calls it.\textsuperscript{11} The schema grasped by the reproductive imagination (that part of our minds that reproduces images from linguistic descriptions) is seamlessly passed to the productive imagination (that part of our minds which produces new mental images) which is both rule-governed and also creative.\textsuperscript{12} The productive imagination expects to receive a set of schema of the past (e.g. imagining a gospel lection), but also intuits, accepts, and projects changes in the schema (e.g.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{11} Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative}, 1:21–22.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 1:68.
\end{flushright}
imagining how that lection might emplot my contemporary experience). Ricoeur names this dialectic of preservation and gradual change as “tradition:” “Let us understand by this term not the inert transmission of some already dead deposit of material but the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity.... [A] tradition is constituted by the interplay of innovation and sedimentation.”¹³ In other words, tradition certainly has a repetitive feature through time as the same stories are told and retold, like the laying down of a firm roadbed with a foundation layer, then stones, then gravel, and finally asphalt. The canon and its subsequent interpretation through time form something solid for us to “travel” on as a community of faith. But the very point of the sedimented layers, the telling and re-telling and interpreting, is that of contemporary travel. The aim of the text is appropriation. Times arise when one of the layers gives way and is discovered to be no longer effective, perhaps even dangerous, for us to travel upon. We may find that we have to jettison old tellings and clichéd, dead interpretations in order to lay new surface. But underneath it all, the canon of scripture is still there. We have innovatively retold it, however, with God’s help and guidance through the Holy Spirit to be sure, and found a new firmness fit for our contemporary modes. But tradition does not mean only the given, sedimented layers; it includes within itself the slow process of innovation as well.

iii. Encountering the Social Imagination in the Biblical Text

When Ricoeur speaks of the social imagination (or the “social imaginary,” as he is more prone to use) he refers to Max Weber whom Ricoeur says defined social action “in

¹³ Ibid. Emphasis mine.
terms of meaningful behavior, mutually oriented and socially integrated.”

This social integration and coordination of behavior is constituted through ideology, ideally in its healthiest form. Every group must “give itself an image of itself” and “play itself” in the theatrical sense of the word, to put itself at issue and on stage.”

We may connect the concept of metaphorical imagination and social imagination in this way: To speak of literary genres is very like speaking of ideologies; genres are established by repetition beyond their initial appearance; their origins are often lost to the reader and appear to have always been. Ricoeur reminds us that every genre, established by layers of sedimented repetition, was once an innovation, a fleck of utopian creativity, an innovative twist on the plot of some other genre. Tradition is the term that Ricoeur uses to mediate these literary forces which refer both to the texts of the past, but also to innovative uses and the recontextualizing of them into the present.

We offer that this term applies equally well to the mediation of social forces of imagination represented by ideology and utopia. Traditions are not only literary; actions may also be traditional in this way. The word “ritual” implies the repetition of action that has some religious consequence. Rituals are patterned, schematized, traditional social performances. They are an appropriation of a religious tradition. But, each instance of present performance is also unique, just as each literary work is unique, and open for innovative change. Every sermon is an act of discourse and also a ritual appropriation of the text in the context of worship. Each sermon stands in a homiletical tradition of all those sermons which have gone before. Sermons are rituals. Still, each sermon bears the potential for innovation, for enacting good news in fresh ways. This is true on the linguistic level, but it is also true on

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the social level. Each sermon retells the biblical story as an ideology or a utopia. Each sermon may be a ritual act of spiritual and social formation or reformation, of integration or subversion, or some of both. Each sermon shapes the self-image of the church as a living, active, social body. The sermon is an invitation to the corpus of the church as a social body to appropriate the concerns of the text. In fact that is the very aim of the sermon!

The biblical texts not only bear “imagination” from its linguistic character as a store of potential metaphors; they also have a social imagination; they give to the Body of Christ certain images of itself. Some texts seem to be more prone to social integration; they state and repeat certain ideas or facts and they invite community repetition of those ideas. They encourage sedimentation of certain traditions.

For instance, Deuteronomy 6 is a chapter full of integrating language. The logic of this sermon attributed to Moses is to consolidate community identity around a certain set of narratives and practices:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4ff).

Additionally, certain key stories are commended by Moses to be often repeated:

In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent signs and wonders—great and terrible—on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors (Deuteronomy 6:20ff).

Supposing along with most modern biblical scholarship that Moses did not actually write these sermons, the intention of the Deuteronomist here appears to be to integrate social imagination via a constant retelling of their liberation from Egypt as the divine act of God.
This repetition of a key story creates group-defining social boundaries justifying its geographic location and claim on Zion.

The prophet Hosea (as well as many of the other prophets) invokes the same story of liberation from Egypt in the mode of subversion and innovation; he portrays God as one who acts with love and is now angry at how 8th century BCE Israel has spurned God’s grace:

But I am the LORD your God, [who brought you] out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me. I cared for you in the desert, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me. So I will come upon them like a lion, like a leopard I will lurk by the path.

The intention of the prophet here is to critique the social imagination of the Deuteronomist by invoking the same shared narrative and recasting it toward a vision of judgment. While Hosea alone does not constitute a full-throated utopian vision, the whole prophetic tradition in Israel and Judah offer profound, positive images of a different kind of religious and political community constituted not simply by shared historical experiences but by shared ethical commitments.

Similarly the New Testament corpus also draws on Mosaic and Passover imagery to offer yet another utopian take on the reign of God. Jesus in the gospels is frequently portrayed as a prophet like Moses and yet greater than Moses whose own death becomes intertwined with the Passover story of liberation. The synoptic gospels relate Jesus’ last supper as a Passover meal. In John’s gospel the meal takes place on the eve of the Passover so that Jesus’ crucifixion itself may be timed with the slaughter of the lambs on the Passover. The whole of Jewish Passover theology and practice is thus subverted, reorganized and taken up into the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the subsequent liberation of those who followed him and have faith in him. A new social imaginary coalesces and integrates around Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God.
The biblical texts reveal, therefore, some important characteristics of the imagination’s ability to construct/destruct social bonds and groups. First, certain genres seem to lean toward either ideology or utopia and yet may contain elements of both. The wisdom tradition is primarily ideological in character seeking repetition and the formation of a sediment of virtue and Godly character. The historical literature in the OT performs best as a series of texts that seek to form religious identity around the narratives of the patriarchs, around the monarchy, and around Jerusalem and the land. And yet, the prophetic tradition marks its beginnings in the same literature, predating the monarchy and functioning with divine authority to consecrate monarchs such as Saul and David. Thus, the second point of note here is that often texts like the prophets which want to subvert the prevailing social imaginary in their life-situations seek not only destructive subversion of status-quos, but also integration around a new set of stories, visions, and practices. The gospels simultaneously seek to subvert Judaic and Greek religious traditions and form a new social identity. The various subgenres in the gospels function in both of these capacities. In other words, one moment’s utopia is often the next moment’s ideology.

So, in the task of preaching, the wise preacher will view the text with an eye to its rhetorical social imagination. Does God in this text seem to innovate by subverting some ideological distortion, by revealing the powers that have co-opted certain images to mask their privilege? Or does God in this text seek to integrate social identity through concepts like covenant or sacrament? Does God in the text seem to want more to form or reform? In its history of interpretation how has the text of my concern been rendered? As primarily forming or reforming? As sedimentary or innovative? Even more to the point, how might one characterize the action of God in the text or behind the text? Does God, in one of the persons
of the Trinity, seem to be integrating social identity or subverting calcified and co-opted social sediment? Or does the author seem to use an image/voice of God to prop up some ideology or to offer a sharply different set of images as divinely inspired?

We offer that these sorts of questions should be integral to exegesis of scripture for preaching to help clarify the preacher’s own purpose in the sermon and what needs might be met. The narratives, symbols, and images offered by scripture are often meaningful on a personal level through the various literary and poetic devices of the metaphoric imagination. But the narratives, symbols and images also function on a social level to form and reform group identity. The kinds of appropriated action that will issue from this process of reflection, on both individual and social levels, will depend on how the preacher understands the metaphors of the text and then how the preacher metaphorizes them into the present. Preaching biblical texts inspires and empowers action on a social level in addition to the individual level.

B. Suspension

To “suspend” means to “hang below” (sus = a Latin prefix for being situated under, below or at the bottom of + pendere = in Latin, to hang). To be in suspense is to be somewhat in a state of dangling brought on by the encounter with the biblical texts through reading. The preacher’s imagination is “diffused in all directions, reviving former experiences, awakening dormant memories, irrigating adjacent sensorial fields.”¹⁵ For Ricoeur, what is suspended is signification; we hold at bay the temptation to too-quickly connect words and meanings, often because of the “no” produced when reading, for instance,

¹⁵ Ibid., 169.
biblical narrative. One-to-one correspondences are not simple across temporal fields. For instance, to read Psalm 23 taxes the mind to recover images of Lords, shepherds, sheep, green pastures, etc., most of which stand at a distance from modern urban and suburban life. So the mind suspends easy signification and introduces “a negative moment” whereby we can mentally play with different significations freely and without regard to the world of hard, sensible realities in which we must act.\(^\text{16}\) By negative, we are not to understand “bad” but rather “empty,” like a stage is empty and ready for the play to begin. Perhaps the term could bear some connection to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” a trait aroused in the reader by the author’s creation, even in fiction, of a “semblance of truth.” The reader becomes willing “for the moment” to suspend the “no” in order to follow the author’s itineraries with a sort of “poetic faith.”\(^\text{17}\)

But we think Ricoeur’s use of the term is differently nuanced. While we would agree that Ricoeur would advocate for a willing spirit in the reader to follow the concerns of the text, suspension as he uses it is a more reader-active enterprise, seeking not only to “go along” with the author, but to begin to make meaning in contemporary experience. This realm of suspension, then, is more closely related to Ricoeur’s description of the second order of reference in the text. This order of reference reflects not only the reproduction of the images necessary to understand the text; now new correspondences are produced and projected onto the future. As such, suspension is a critical act of discernment and decision.

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 170.

i. **Suspension and the Theological Imagination: Holy Spirit.**

If the biblical text is aimed toward the productive imagination or what we have styled revelation, then what exactly is revealed? Ultimately, the text (and the sermon after it) reveal itineraries for appropriated action. Certainly, claims about God and God’s actions in the past are revealed; this is the text’s first order of reference. However, possibilities for the future are what God the Holy Spirit brings to bear in the second order of reference of the biblical text. As the preacher reads the text of the past, she is presented with itineraries for the future. The imagination is, thus, ultimately *eschatological* in character. This orientation of the productive imagination is often theologically associated with the work of the Holy Spirit, in particular through the lens of Paul’s understanding of God’s work. In 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, Paul speaks of the presence of the Holy Spirit as “a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” God’s action in the past as described in the biblical narrative is seen by Paul as consistent with what God does in the present and may do in the future. In Romans 8:22-23, Paul describes the creation as a woman in labour groaning for the future, “and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption.” God’s future is moving toward us to adopt us. But, as Ricoeur has noted, we are presented with varying itineraries one of which will become “us” as we close down other alternatives and make our choices.

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18 One might wonder if this includes the present tense as well. It does not yet. The present is ever slippery, constantly proceeding into the past. In this position of suspension, possibilities are approaching us having been projected into our future by our reading of the text, but the reader is still playing with them not having made a clear choice for action. Possibilities may be chosen and acted upon in the present. However, they then cease to be possible and are, rather, actual.
ii. Suspension and the Metaphorical Imagination

Once we have encountered a narrative, Ricoeur asserts that we suspend the quotidian, holding our contemporary course of events at bay so that a space for consideration may be opened up. Ricoeur recognizes that our imagination is not so discreet as to separate out our attempts to reproduce these narratives in our own consciousness by reading/hearing and producing new significations toward the future. Readers schematize the biblical literature in such a way that we begin to project a future that is, perhaps, consonant with that scheme or is at least responsive to it. This suspension makes possible a second order of reference which begins to unfold from the biblical text. The schema of action suggested by the text is both reproductive in the sense that the preacher can “see” the characters and follow the plot of the narrative. At the same time the schema of action becomes suggestive of what might happen in the future unfolding from this moment of reading. The preacher’s own desires are met by the schema of the narrative and refigured through that schema toward the sermon. The God who was active in the text is now available to be considered as the God who may yet be active in the future.19

Now the preacher enters the neutralizing function of imagination. What does Ricoeur mean by neutralizing? The imagination is a space of play that is at liberty to consider “what if.” Here the preacher experiences that “free play of possibilities in a state of noninvolvement with respect to the world of…action” (170). The preacher becomes free to ask, “What if...” What if God really does speak to people from burning bushes? What if Jesus heals the sick and raises the dead? What if the Holy Spirit inspires people to speak for God? The imagination of the text induces a suspension in the consciousness of the preacher where such

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questions may be played with, imagined, reacted to, denied, or embraced. When the imagination of the text meets contemporary life, a process of metaphorization begins. And with metaphorization comes critique that can unfold across several levels.

Metaphorization is a key concept for suspension, and we will therefore spend a bit of time defining it. Ricoeur defines metaphorization by first looking at the way some biblical material is embedded in another narrative. The parables, in particular, are little narratives that are encompassed by another narrative. The character, Jesus, might begin on the level of his own narrative by saying, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:20)? But then Jesus proceeds to tell a brief story about a woman hiding leaven in dough (Luke 13:24). The reader must suspend one’s attention to the encompassing narrative and attend to the embedded one. Having done so one then must return to original level. Metaphorization for Ricoeur is this “process at work between the encompassing narrative and the embedded narrative.”

To arrive at some understanding of the concept “kingdom of God” one must navigate the process of transformation across both domains. For our purpose this sort of metaphorization that is bound to the text of the Bible really belongs to a first-order-of-reference reading of the text that we outlined in the section on encounter.

However, another form of metaphorization is proper to this second order of reference with which we are concerned in this section. The preacher may view the chosen text for preaching as a text embedded into the encompassing narrative of our contemporary lives. Therefore, she may look for ways to build certain correspondences between the narrative fields both of the text and of our own narrative experience. To do so, she has to, for at least a while, suspend the contemporary world of her own experience.

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20 Ricoeur, “The Bible and the Imagination,” 150.
For instance, the cross is an ancient Roman device of public humiliation and execution. One cannot, thankfully, go anywhere to witness a crucifixion in our own time. What might it mean, then, when Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23, NIV)? Our own imagination experiences a “no” and a “yes.” We can imagine a cross and perhaps even bearing it on our shoulders as Jesus did. Historical criticism helps us fill in these blanks. This is the “yes.” But a cross every day? How can we do this? What does our “cross” mean, and how do we even find it? This is the “no” of the metaphor. The suspension of everyday, real life is our “luminous clearing” where we can play with various ideas about what this metaphor might mean in our personal and congregational contexts. We could arrive at answers that vary widely. Perhaps the emphasis should be on “cross” which might mean that we should undertake a life so like Jesus that we risk public shame and even violent death for the sake of loving God and others. Or, perhaps the emphasis should be on “daily.” Who among us can maintain such a level of sacrifice on any day, much less a daily basis? Might it be that Jesus is encouraging us to more gradually assume a posture of self-sacrifice by taking it on a bit each day and experiencing the slow process of sanctification? Might we even reject cross-bearing entirely as too violent and too costly for many women, as some feminist theologians do? If so, what then might we do with the cross? On the other hand, we might see the cross as essential to the interpretation of our own contemporary experience.

We must note the increase in use of the modal verb, “might.” This is the verb of suspension, of consideration, the verb of possibility, of playful imagination. When we use the verb “might” we are not yet convicted of a particular appropriation of “our cross.” The preacher may examine herself as to why she would be repelled or attracted to a certain
project and what motives she might have to act in some particular manner in the future. The preacher’s own field of experience, which overlaps with the congregation’s and also the culture’s fields of experience, begin to develop itineraries of action toward horizons of possibility. The innovative power of imagination to transform “given meanings into new ones...enables one to construe the future as the possible theatre of one’s liberty, as a horizon of hope.”\(^{21}\) She might choose one direction for the sermon or she might choose another. Still, the metaphor, and our playful work with it, is generating practical possibilities for appropriation. Ricoeur observes that these possibilities have an almost spiritual, eschatological effect; the possibilities appear to be approaching us from the future. One of these possibilities might actually be our future. But at this point we do not know which it is.

In the mode of suspension, these possibilities throw us into a type of hesitation, “an in-decision.” Ricoeur’s thinking about the human will describes hesitation in ways that mirror a sort of Christian discipleship in the form of sermoncraft: “I sense a self-loss in [hesitation]. It is an anxiety of not being at all, since I fail to be one. In hesitation I am many, and so am not.”\(^{22}\) I might choose this path, or I might choose that one. The important thing to note is that the origin of these itineraries is an encounter with the biblical text in the field of our experience. The text and its reference to God is the key that has opened certain doors of perception in our pastoral imaginations. A one-act play festival is going on in our conscious and subconscious mind. And we are free to move from stage to stage, to entertain certain possibilities as well as to be entertained by them. We begin to use certain modal verbs to express possibility: “In the sermon, I might say X, or I might say Y,…or then again I could


say Z.” As Ricoeur puts it, “Play is formidable precisely because it is loose in the world, planting its mediations everywhere, shattering the illusion of the immediacy of the real.”

As Sunday approaches, the preacher will leave this mode of suspension and will “get real” and choose something definitive to say about the text, drawing on both the first and second orders of textual reference. She will have played with the text by placing its metaphors, symbols, and narratives up close to the metaphors, symbols, and narratives of modern life; she will note the consonances and dissonances between then and now. The sermon, in truth, is the appropriation of certain content, certain confessions, from among other imaginative reflections on the biblical text. If Ricoeur is right that what makes the imagination of the biblical text unique is its reference to God’s action in the past, then the sermon’s content will indicate (perhaps in ways more suggestive than definitive) that God might be seen in action today, that the traces of God’s action might be seen through faith.

At some point in the suspension, the preacher shifts from what she might say to what she can say, whittling down myriad itineraries to a select group of projects: “I am able to authentically claim A (plus, perhaps, B, C, and/or D).” The preacher’s interior, imaginative convictions are shaping toward action.

iii. Suspension and the Social Imagination

How does this mode of suspension function on the social level? Now, we are brought back to the “luminous clearing” of the preacher’s own imagination but from a different perspective. As the preacher moves from the itineraries she might pursue in the sermon toward what things she can and will confess, she should also attend to the aspects of social formation and reformation that the text implies on both the first and second orders of
reference. Does the congregation of hearers experience a lack of social cohesion? Do people come from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, and life experiences? Then, how can the sermon draw on the socially forming qualities of the biblical texts to build a greater sense of community?

Two paths present themselves: First, some texts are primarily ideological and seek to lay down layers of tradition about who God is and how God acts. The psalms, for instance, often seek to affirm some characteristic of God that we experience in God’s action in the text and in the world. Psalm 8 names God as creator who continues to care for creation and humanity within it. Surely a sermon on Psalm 8 will want to find ways to point to God’s care and provision in creation which we continue to experience in our lives. This text, as we read it, is attempting to forge some social agreement and unity based on a common experience of the majesty of God as seen in creation. That it is a psalm and, thus, intended for use in worship reinforces its ideological tendencies. Nevertheless, one might also imagine this text as mildly utopian, offering a vision of God or confessing something about God that subverts an established or competing understanding by offering an innovation. Perhaps the psalm intends to offer an understanding of God as intimately involved with creation rather than distant and removed. The psalm, in fact, explicitly counters an understanding of humanity as insignificant, rather they are “a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned ... with glory and honour” (Psalm 8:5).

Conversely, some texts are more clearly utopian in nature, implicitly or explicitly subverting another too-consolidated image. Apocalyptic literature often seeks to supplant some unjust social system with a more God-focused social reality. But even less extreme or violent literary ideas can be utopian. The four gospels depict most women in a very positive
light often surpassing the Twelve in faithfulness and leadership. This counter-cultural image is a radical notion for Jesus’ day and remained so for almost two millennia. Only recently in many Christian traditions have we begun to view men and women as equal partners in Christ’s ministry precisely because this utopian gospel vision is finally taking firm hold in the social imagination.

This leads us to assert that no text is purely ideological or completely utopian. *Every text can be both reforming and forming.* Many new variations become typical. All current genres and types were once an innovation on a type or paradigm. Every text that seeks to consolidate social identity around particular images of God’s action also has in mind some image that it seeks to supplant. And every text that seeks to critique a social order has some alternate vision it wants to confess and around which it longs to gather its hearers. For Ricoeur, as discussed previously, the path to creative action and community depends on this tense relationship between two false senses of consciousness, ideology (which hides manipulation) and utopia (which is an irreal product of fantasy): “We take possession of the creative power of the imagination only in a critical relation with these two figures of false consciousness. As though, in order to cure the folly of utopia, we had to call upon the ‘healthy’ function of ideology, and as though the critique of ideologies could only be conducted by a consciousness capable of looking at itself from the perspective of nowhere.”

In the suspension between reading and preaching, the preacher not only must weigh what is meaningful from the encounter with the text, but also what is ethical. The dialectic between ideology and utopia begs the questions, “What is good to preach in this context?”

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What is right? What is just? What could be appropriated from fiction into action?" If I seem to be repeating many of the same theological assertions in my preaching, then the question is worth asking: is my insistence on this repetition masking my own power or the power of my office to ensure that my status is maintained or that I will never have to be afraid of losing or changing anything? One great gift of postmodern interpretive method in biblical scholarship is a willingness to allow texts to deconstruct themselves. Not only should the preacher allow this to happen with the text; she should also probe well behind her own passions for texts, ideas, and positions to discover how they might be reinforcing her own status, role, and authority. Simply put, theology and doctrine can function as ideological “superstructures” that express excess claims to legitimacy and appear to have no origin, having always been with us. The imagery in our preaching can slip from a healthy expression of fiction into the obscuring, power-masking function of illusion.

Ideology is not the only concept with a pathological face in this scheme. Utopia, too, has an unhealthy expression for preaching. Ricoeur calls it schizophrenic. Given the concept, perhaps the better term is dislocation. Utopianism in Ricoeur’s terms expresses impatience with intermediate steps and a tendency toward fantasy and wandering. The “nowhere” of utopia may or may not be directed toward “here and now.” This means that, while sermons might occasionally cast a drastically innovative vision for those gathered, the steady diet of sermons might more healthily view innovation as gradual and often focused on

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24 The implication here is that some ethic or criterion might be brought from outside the text under consideration to validate or invalidate certain itineraries of the text. While I do believe that this is the case, it is not our purpose in this exercise.

25 Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, 183.

26 Ibid., 179.

27 Ibid., 183.
the *next step* that God is empowering toward a larger utopian vision that God is offering in the gospel.

Nevertheless, for the sake of justice, preachers must sometimes proclaim radical utopias from the pulpit as God’s way and will. In the American South of the 1950’s and 60’s, it was no accident that the primary leaders toward civil rights were preachers, most of whom were not satisfied with preaching about small steps in the face of a sedimented tradition of discrimination. In January 1963, Alabama governor George Wallace called for racial “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” Martin Luther King’s sermonic response later that year was a dream of integration more fantastic than might have ever seemed possible at the time.28

C. Appropriation

At this point we begin to make a turn from hermeneutics to ontology. One of the concepts that bridges this transition is the concept of appropriation: making one’s own something that was alien. A more truly Ricoeurian definition might be the recognition that what was once *other than* the self is now discovered, in fact, to be *part of* the self. We would add that this is a work of grace, God’s continued loving creation in our lives. Appropriation marks the return to the self from the detour of hermeneutics. For Ricoeur, the evidences of this appropriation are forms of testimony and ethics. Ricoeur’s essay, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” is well-known and used in homiletics.29 However, Ricoeur’s turn back to ethics


and the ontology of the self has not yet been deeply appreciated in homiletics as it should be.

We are deeply concerned that, among mainline and evangelical North American churches, preaching is being done by a ministerial class who are appropriating the concerns of the text on behalf of a passive congregation. Rather, we find that the Word of God is not a static scriptural content, nor is it even a well-stated and poetic set of “meanings.” God’s Word is a process that changes the itineraries of human life, individually and socially. God’s Word sanctifies those who hear it and makes them holy. God’s Word creates the church and changes the world by incorporating ALL who hear it into God’s action in this world. This is what appropriation really means: That we who deign to listen find ourselves appropriated by God into God’s mission for the world.

i. Appropriation and the Theological Imagination: Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh

We have seen that the text brings forward the idea of a creative God whose actions are narrated in the biblical text; we have also seen that the Spirit is moving toward us from the future, offering possible itineraries for action. The Christ-moment of preaching is making the Word into flesh, taking certain actions up into the body and thereby revealing our choices and our confessions. For the preacher, the event of the sermon is a Christ-like moment, a performance of faith in the God named in the text of the past but confessed in speech about the present and future. The sermon so redescribes reality that our confessions issue forth in actions. Sermons at their best follow Jesus’ own preaching in Luke 4, when, having read from the scroll of Isaiah that “the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me...,” Jesus took these words up into his own flesh and claimed, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your
hearing.” The pastor embodies the word in its proclamation, modeling one kind of embodied response to the biblical text, a confessional response. In the sermon, the congregation will also enter its own hermeneutical and imaginative suspension playing with various possibilities for response. They will make choices to embody the word or not. But the sermon best aids the congregation by suggesting a specific itinerary or two from among the many that might be available.

ii. Appropriation: Metaphor as the Birthplace of Action

One of the signals of the authenticity of Jesus’ ministry is the consistency of his preaching with his actions, his confession poured forth in ethical action. For us, too, no sermon exists until convictions are enacted in an event of confession. Faith can posit God into our daily existence in the mind and the affections. But faith does not preach until those convictions move the body and empower the voice in an act of speech. Actions authenticate beliefs. The second person of the Trinity, while pre-existent, chose the path of incarnation and brought divine mind and spirit into confession through a human voice and body.

What carries our preaching minds from suspension to appropriation, from projects and itineraries to execution and forward motion? The vehicle is decision, choice: “I can and will confess that I believe this to be true.” In deciding what she will say, the preacher unites the self with some particular image of future action and thereby foreclosing, if only for a time, on other itineraries. To preach is to discover the self in light of the witness of text and church to an active God still acting. Still, having discovered the self, the preacher drives on toward what it might mean to be this particular self.
Though Ricoeur does not use this language, the choice to confess, to express faith through body and voice, is the hinge between prospect and performance. Action, where it is seen in Christian liturgy goes by the name “ritual”; the sermon is appropriation as a ritual act. Tom Driver, ritual theorist, helpfully notes that two aspects of confession are similar to Ricoeur’s movement from a psychological to a social sense of imagination. First, for Driver, confession means “to position oneself in relation to the world” answering the questions, “‘Where do we stand? What is our situation?’”\(^\text{30}\) In ritual performance, we encounter symbols and metaphors that provide a constructive narrative within which we may come to understand ourselves (as both individuals and communities) in different ways. The narratives ground us in deep symbols: cross, font, cup, loaf, reign of God, etc. These material symbols function as existential anchors. When we confess the God who works through them, that confession positions us in the social world.

Driver’s second sense of confession is to “display where one stands, what one chooses to be, what the group is, where it stands.”\(^\text{31}\) Driver calls this “coming out,” confession in the sense of displaying one’s identity with shining clarity. In this sense, confession is the ritual act of the preacher which locates her individual faith in the God of the biblical text and demonstrates that faith within the social fabric of the church. For Driver, confession is the birthplace of ethics. Having confessed our identity, we are driven to perform the implications of this identity in the social milieu of both church and culture.


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 114-115
iii. Appropriation and the Social Imagination

Often, what we most hope for in preaching is some active movement toward embodied change; we long for preacher and hearer alike to be empowered to take up the metaphors of the biblical text into their lives and say, “With God’s help, I can...” The classical theological term for this idea is sanctification, being made holy in heart and life. For Ricoeur, the pathway to fresh action on a social level is paved with fiction, poetry, and narrative. Hearing the stories and the often-poetic language of the biblical text can open a set of references to a world of action that is now possible and which before hearing was not.

Lance Pape beautifully articulates Ricoeur’s thinking about reference in this passage about reading a novel:

The words on the page confidently assert that so-and-so does such and such, and yet the reader knows that nothing has changed: the same living room, the same reading lamp, the same glow from the neighbor’s window, the same quiet of the night—all these features of experience continue to constitute the ostensive domain seemingly quite unperturbed by the bold predications of the text. And yet the ineluctable pull of discourse in consciousness is not only toward sense but also toward reference. The language of the story obviously has no purchase on the ostensive domain; another “space” must open up. As the reader follows the plot under the “vow of obedience,” an alternative emerges. And now here is this undeniable insight, this palpable revulsion, this augmented awareness, this subtle subversion, this terror, awe, embarrassment, and fondness—a very real sense in which the reader is transported, shown something, enlarged, given access to a way of being that was not available or present apart from this encounter with this carefully crafted language. And having been shown this new world...something is different. Even as the book closes and its projected world instantly gives sway in consciousness to the familiar ostensive domain, there is the powerful sense that something remains fundamentally changed for the reader—that she now enjoys new options in relation to the world of the reading lamp and the night sounds, and the neighbor across the street.32

For us as Christians, preachers, and listeners to Christian preaching, we name God into this process with words such as “inspiration” and “revelation” and “God’s Word” to us. How does this “fundamental change” take place? It takes place, we say, as the Creator God still creates possibility via the biblical text and the Holy Spirit converts the “thing of the text”

32 Pape, The Scandal of Having Something to Say, 80. Ricoeur’s full quotation on the “vow of obedience” is in Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation (Yale University Press, 1970), 27.: “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow to rigor, vow to obedience.”
from sense unto reference. *Something is different.* We claim that the texts have collided with
our contemporary life and opened a grand metaphoric universe, a theoretical set of
correspondences that have broken open and whose loose ends now reach out for the strands
of our experience and forge connections, building some and resisting others. A sermon
reflects this hybridity of imagination—no longer entirely biblical, no longer entirely our own
story. The preacher speaks from this hybrid narrative, our story and God’s story mutually
grafted to one another. How can we ask where the difference is between God’s grace and our
work? We cannot dissect them without destroying them. Is it not enough to stand back from
the whole and say that we can see both God’s action and our own in the sermon? Christ’s
own dual nature is thus reflected in the sermon.

But what the sermon does as a publicly performed act of confession is bridge the gap
from an *individual* appropriation to a *corporate* one. The sermon is a model for individual
confession of faith. But, as Ricoeur reveals in the essay of our concern, metaphors function
on a social level consolidating identity around certain symbols and also reforming identity
around different interpretations. The sermon is a social act, a ritual act. The sermon and the
liturgy fulfill their role as the church’s imagination when they provide social space for the
congregation to “play” with what it might look like for them as individuals and as a people to
embody their confessions. Our hunch is that when church communities rarely change or take
up fresh social commitments then one can trace back through their failure to act and discover
a lack of confession or a confession that remained hidden and was not actively appropriated
in bodies or in the Body.

How can the sermon assist the Body of Christ to leave the hesitation inherent in
suspension and act? First, as I have said, the sermon is itself a model for appropriation. The
The preacher has left her own imaginative playground and staked some claims for the gospel. So the sermon offers to the hearer a performance that does more than stand in for their own confession; the sermon should also elicit their confession. Second, sermons can help the confessed word progress toward the ethical deed by offering concrete suggestions as to what it might look like for the church to act in mission. The idea of application is not entirely dead in our estimation. The sermon can certainly give images for mission to the hearers. Third, the sermon can bridge to other ritual acts which help the hearers make the transition from spectator to participant. How can the liturgy as a space of social imagination employ rituals and acts of worship that serve to model the change that the preacher thinks God is seeking to empower? What acts might consolidate Christian social identity around the deep symbols of church and scripture?

Even the most utopian of sermons should suggest some ethical and active response to the encounter with the biblical text. While Dr. King’s “I have a dream” speech was very utopian, he also gave concrete examples to suggest precisely how people might respond to see that “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24, ASV). These words from the 8th century BCE prophet, and the God that they implied, were alive in King’s imagination. These prophetic words were not trapped in the past, but implied a present future that he readily confessed: “With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.” As Ricoeur later said, “It is not that we are without

33 King, Martin Luther, “I Have a Dream.”
utopia, but that we are without paths to utopia. And without a path towards it, without concrete and practical mediation in our field of experience, utopia becomes a sickness.”

III. A Capable God Who Renders Us Capable

Before we leave this chapter, we must account for why more appropriation of the gospel does not occur and why preaching is often so ineffective. Is it because preachers are using the wrong forms or styles? Is it because of the fractured attention span of the postmodern listener? Ricoeur’s programme seems to exude a confidence in the human capacity for transformation via encounter with the text. We wonder if such confidence is justified.

The Apostle Paul laments his own inability to act in a manner that is consistent with what he imagines to be possible:

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:19-24, NRSV)

What Paul reflects here is that human brokenness, lack, and inability is included as an integral part of what it means to imagine being Christian in our own time. While the biblical text does a fine job of seeding possibility into our thinking and our futures, try as we might we often fail to take up these futures into our flesh and appropriate them. Even the smallest of intermediate steps toward the future might be as hard to reach as the whole utopian vision.

We receive the metaphors of the text as a gift from a creative God. We receive as a gift of the

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34 Kearney, On Paul Ricoeur, 139.
Spirit certain possible futures revealed by these metaphors. But at the moment in which we are called to incarnate these received gifts we often lack the will to act.

Ricoeur in a later article categorizes human capability into four categories: the power to say (“the ability spontaneously to produce a reasoned discourse”), to act (“the capacity to produce events in society and in nature”), to recount (to emplot one’s experience, rendering it intelligible in a narrative), and to impute (to assign responsibility to the self for one’s speech and actions). All of these are forms of appropriation. He continues, noting that these capacities, at first blush, do not appear to demand recognition on the part of other people. The certainty of these capacities (or lack thereof) seems a private matter. But, in practice, each of these capacities implies the recognition of another: to say something implies that the said is oriented to someone; meaningful action “occurs in conjunction with other agents”; recounting a story implies the presence of other characters and stories; and imputation implies responsibility before others (and, from a Christian perspective, before God).

The sermon, then, is an expression of capability across each of these domains and before God and others. The sermon is an appropriated form of discourse that says something to someone about something; the sermon is an appropriated ritual action, an oral performance in which promises are related or made, human trouble is made plain, and God’s love is pledged, among many other speech acts; the sermon is an appropriated telling of the gospel into an intelligible account; the preacher also appropriates God’s Word by accepting responsibility for her speech and action within the community of faith and before God’s altar.

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36 Ibid., 24.
But the sermon is often not so successful in eliciting these capabilities from hearers. Why is this the case? Does Ricoeur have anything to offer in the face of human sin, brokenness, fallibility, and guilt? If imagination is the birthplace of practical possibilities, how come the result is often denial, refusal, and stillbirth? Ricoeur’s description of the path from the “schematization of my projects, leading through the figurability of my desires, and ending in the imaginative variations of ‘I can’” can, if read one way, seem facile and over-simple. Does Ricoeur account for the failure of preaching?

While we do not have the space here to visit Ricoeur’s entire oeuvre, Ricoeur’s early phenomenological work deals intensely with these questions of sin, fallibility, guilt, and evil. As we read the broad strokes of his thought, Ricoeur became convinced that one could not speak directly about these experiences apart from the ways that human express them. This is the predication for his works, *The Symbolism of Evil* and then *Freud and Philosophy*. Ricoeur’s subsequent long detour through hermeneutics, metaphor, and narrative eventually reveals that to have a self, to be a self, is to understand oneself in front of and in light of various "texts," systems of testimony, language, history, culture and action that have certain correspondences. The essay of our concern in this thesis reveals that human capability (while never assured beyond all doubt) is always a product of the imagination. Before we appropriate anything, before we say, act, testify, or impute, we *imagine* ourselves capable, *even if* we do not consequently act. When we approach this boundary of the will, imagining ourselves able to respond to God and yet not doing so, we discover the line between ontology and eschatology, between what we *are and have been* and what we *might become* as Richard Kearney, reflecting on Ricoeur’s essay, calls it.37 The sermon, at its best, is the place where

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the human imagination is opened to the possibility of a divinely-restored capacity to appropriate the Word of God.

So, we reframe the question for preaching away from our capacities toward the only One whose capacities are unbroken. Rather than asking “Is humanity capable of living toward and into God’s image,” we find it more helpful to ask “Is God capable of rendering humanity capable?” If we say yes to this latter question, then we are called to account for how God might do this. We believe that the processes of imagination, as we have outlined it in this chapter, constitute the loci of the triune God’s healing, sanctifying, capable work to reveal a surplus of promise over pastness, of hope over destiny, of credit (creance) over defect, that nourishes the possibility of forgiveness. In spite of evil you are still capable of doing good! You are capable of being better than your past actions, you are more than what you did, the future holds the promise of a possible goodness that is greater than the sum of your past deeds and more primary! Disabled by the past, you are still able in the future!

No cause for preaching exists unless the sermon can do more than sum up the account of our failures. Only trust in a God capable of rendering us capable by projecting a different possibility for the future course of our days can account for the persistence of gospel preaching through time. The impulse to preach spills over from this “surplus of promise over pastness” that the preacher herself has experienced in her own imagination. In the moment of proclamation, she now finds herself rendered capable of speech, action, testimony, and responsibility. How? By the possible world which she has heard and seen. She has experienced the shock of the possibility of God’s action in our own present and future, even in spite of her own failures and in the face of the incapacities of the congregation. And yet they have returned again of a Sunday, and the preacher has become willing to fail again not only for the sake of Christ, but as Christ crucified, incarnating, appropriating again a Word

38 Ibid., 57.
from God that is not bound to the past but can address the community today even while that community still hesitates and remains unresponsive. That Word of God appropriated by the preacher is a word of forgiveness from a God that elects to view us through the lens of God’s own creation and redemption in Jesus Christ mediated to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ricoeur’s confidence in his hermeneutic methodology does not stem from a similar confidence in the heuristics of the human imagination. Rather, we believe that his hermeneutical confidence grows from his Christian experience of a God who views humanity with empowering grace. He describes this imaginative grace which communicates capability under the sign of forgiveness:

> Under the sign of forgiveness, the guilty person is to be considered capable of something other than his offenses and his faults. He[sic] is held to be restored to his capacity for acting, and action restored to its capacity for continuing…And, finally, this restored capacity is enlisted by promising as it projects action toward the future. The formula for this liberating word, reduced to the bareness of its utterance, would be: you are better than your actions.³⁹

Thus, preaching as a moment of incarnate action could also be understood as a moment of resurrection when Christ steps forth out of the tomb of our imaginations and continues to give and we continue to receive and to act not of our own power. Christ is not simply a metaphorical model for us to follow but is the very power of God to whom the Christian imagination gives witness. Perhaps before imagining our own appropriations, sermons could help us perceive the God who appropriates us when we cannot yet act.

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Chapter 4
The Appropriated Word of God As the Sacramental Impulse

Where the Word of God is appropriated, Christian worship occurs. It happens at the intersection of the divine imagination (expressed through the biblical text) and the church’s imagination (as expressed through its own stories and prayers). The gospel captured in the text is released into the imagination and into the bodies of those present through preaching and through the sacraments. We consider the sacraments to be excellent lenses through which one may see the Word of God enacted, and we suggest that embodied, worshipful response is also the best measure of the sermon’s authenticity.

In our view, the sermon is a ritual act which normally occurs in the context of liturgical worship. Ricoeur’s general hermeneutical theory helps us to understand the mimetic process and how ideas encoded into a text (or other form) may be transmitted to an individual or group and unlock potential for appropriation, for embodied response. In chapter three, we have began to wrestle with how Ricoeur’s general hermeneutics might be helpful for sermoncraft.

We now turn to consider how these general hermeneutics take specific form in specific locus of God’s Church. When we consider this, we discover that the sermon is almost never experienced apart from the setting of worship. It is not an island unto itself, although many preachers treat it as such and often pay little attention to the sermon’s setting.

We find it somewhat ironic that, while preachers are working many hours to produce efficacious sermons that encourage and invite people to appropriate God’s Word, pastors often pay scant attention to the very places in Christian worship where efficacy is most valued and where Ricoeur’s general hermeneutics might be most clearly seen: in the
sacramental impulse, although Ricoeur himself did not explore this area directly to our knowledge. In the sacraments, the people encounter God’s Word (usually scriptures and prayers) as well as a concrete symbol, which gives even more definition for the imagination to “play” with. The ordinary course of life is suspended in consideration of what the congregation claims that God is doing in the life or lives of the recipients of the sacraments. Then the symbols are appropriated. People actually respond. Water is applied. Bread and wine are eaten. God’s speech is heard in first-person form: “I baptize you...”; “This is my body given for you....” These ritual acts finish with a type of reception. Do those participating deeply consider the meaning of the sacramental act? We cannot know for certain. However, what we do know is that room is made in the social imaginary of Christian worship for them to begin to appropriate God’s Word in the sacrament through their active engagement with the symbols. We view sacramentality as a Christian ritual form of Ricoeur’s general hermeneutics. And we view the sacraments as excellent models for preaching that can help sermons become more participatory and thereby more meaningful and sanctifying.

This chapter will review the theological, practical, and historical relationship between the sermon and sacramental rites in Christian liturgy. We will proceed in four sections: first, we will briefly consider the incarnation of God in creation, Jesus Christ, and in the church as the origin of both preaching and sacraments; next, we will review the classical definitions of sacrament particularly as those definitions relate to preaching; third, we will consider Christian preaching as sacramental, in particular reviewing the theologies of word and sacrament of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley. We will see how these reformers understand the Word of God as being at the root of both the sacramental impulse and the metaphoric impulse of preaching; Several times we will refer to the “sacramental impulse”
and to “sacramentals.” What we mean by the sacramental impulse is the indomitable way that God’s Word seems to consistently present itself to us through the material order. Most Protestants recognize two rites, baptism and holy communion, as sacraments. Roman Catholics recognize seven. But the truth is that we all have many more sacramental rites which, while not sacraments, are means of grace to us. What we are seeking to reveal is the notion that preaching, while NOT a sacrament but very LIKE a sacrament, has as its end active human participation in the gospel empowered by the Holy Spirit.

I. The Incarnation of the Word as the Origin of Preaching and the Sacramental Impulse

As we have seen in Chapter One, when God speaks, the material order is deeply affected. When God speaks in Genesis, the material order is brought to fruition in the speaking; the divine intention empties itself into a fleshy cosmos. In John’s Gospel, the word which God spoke in creation becomes human flesh supremely in Jesus. In DI’s terms the “rain and snow” of divine intention both create and inhabit new salvific opportunities through the created order. Through the fleshy prophet a “new thing” is promised and Israel is called upon to embody the implications of that promise through faith, which, in their own way and in their own very real circumstances, they do. Christian doctrine has often made a clear distinction between natural theology and revealed theology, a distinction we do not care to assail here (though we do believe the distinction is often more artificial than obvious). What we want to indicate here is that many biblical texts describe revelation as happening through the created order. Most commonly, this divine use of creation is termed in the church as “sacrament.”
We particularly appreciate the sacramental understanding of Orthodox theologian, Dumitru Stăniloae who makes a distinction between three forms of sacraments and yet recognizes within all three a similar divine desire for union with the material order.¹ For Stăniloae, the first sacrament is creation itself. The second sacrament is Jesus Christ who, being fully human and fully divine, is the “perfect link” between God and God’s creatures: “In him the Creator becomes at the same time a human being and the human becomes at the same time creator.”² The third sacrament, then, is the Church which embodies “the union of the first sacrament (creation) with second sacrament (Christ)” by the power of the Holy Spirit.³ In each sacrament the Scriptures portray a profound connection of Word and flesh. In creation, the material order is spoken into being; in Jesus the Word becomes flesh; and the Church is called out (ekklesia) by the Holy Spirit from its hidden places to embody Christ in every place and age.

Why rehearse this relationship between Word and flesh here? Because in practice, in both Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions, a too-sharp distinction has been wrought between preaching and sacraments in the churches when, in fact, a beautiful union of grace is implied in both that reflects the affirmations about the Word of God which we deduced in the prior chapters: In chapter one, we determined that God’s Word operates on three intersecting planes. Now we posit that these three planes function to define the whole notion of incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh: First, on the theological/anthropological plane, the

¹ For a lament about the ways in which the Western church has focused more on the sacraments of redemption than creation, see James F White, Sacraments as God’s Self Giving: Sacramental Practice and Faith (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 56.


³ Ibid.
Word of God is initiated by God but fulfilled co-operatively in human life; God’s Word is God’s, to be sure, in all of its various forms: creation, Christ, and church, and also in preaching and the sacraments. This fulfillment then implies a temporal plane: God’s Word refers to God’s work in the past but aims to name God’s work in the present and the future; the Latin roots of the word “event” literally mean “to come out”; in an event, some hidden, abstract intention comes out of its coded past or imaginary origin and enters the present through sensate material and/or is recognized as a future potential (eventual). Thirdly, the power of divine intention coming out into an event of personal expression and experience implies the material/spiritual plane: God’s Word depends on “weak” material to confer divine grace. In communication, we subject our powerful, hidden thoughts and motivations to the articulated grunts and phonemes of human speech in the hope that we can communicate some part of our desires and motives to another person or people. So also, God subjects God’s Word to the material order in the hope that another may take them up, understand them in their own context, and own them, even love them, by appropriation. Incarnation is not simply a static doctrine about God’s work in Christ; it is a description of the dynamic way God speaks and works, from beginning to end, revealed definitively in the person of Jesus Christ. Incarnation is the continual process of the divine intention being appropriated, “coming out,” through human expression, then being hidden in the depths of human hearts only to grow again to the point of coming out through human expression, then being hidden…etc.

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II. Word As Sacrament: An Historical View

A. Classical Definitions

Defining what is and what is not a sacrament has been a major concern for practical Christian theology from Augustine forward. For most of Christian history, the number of sacraments was not defined.\(^5\) The development of a definition has led to an ironic conclusion in Protestant theology and practice: while the number of official sacraments was greatly curtailed, the variety of what might be considered “sacramental” has continued, as ever, to flourish.

Augustine named only two criteria for a sacrament:

1) a sacrament is a sign, a material, sensate element which points toward some other concept or idea. In semiotic terms, a signifier pointing to something signified; and

2) that sign should bear some resemblance to that which is signified (e.g. wine to blood, bread to flesh, etc.).\(^6\)

Thus, a sacrament had an outward sign pointing toward some invisible reality and somehow contained and mediated that reality to the receiver of the sacrament.\(^7\) This simple definition reigned over the sacramental development of the Roman Church from the 4\(^{th}\) century until the 12\(^{th}\) century. The vagueness of the definition led to dozens of different sign-acts being called sacraments: application of ashes to penitents, reciting of creeds, burial of the dead, etc.

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\(^5\) White, *Sacraments as God’s Self Giving*, 70.


\(^7\) “invisibulis gratiae visibilis forma” – a visible form of invisible grace.
Hugh of St. Victor in 12th century Paris sharpened the definition by adding two points:

3) A sacrament should be *authorized* to point to what it does. Institution from the hands of Jesus (i.e. “dominical institution”) is the prime example of such authorization, but not the only legitimate authorization. Apostolic and ecclesial authorization were admissible as well; and

4) The sacrament must also be capable of *conferring* the benefits which it signifies.

Peter Lombard in the late 12th century developed the classical formulation of sacrament for the Roman church. Since penance had already become widely accepted as a sacrament, Lombard omitted reference to “physical or material element” and formed the following definition: “A sacrament is precisely defined as a sign of the grace of God, and a form of invisible grace, which is such that it bears its likeness and exists as its cause.”

Lombard also set the list of seven sacraments which remain the standard in the Roman church.

Luther and Calvin, as we shall see, restricted the authorization of a sacrament only to Christ which put the number of sacraments observed by many Protestants from seven to two: holy baptism and the Eucharist. One of the motives behind the requirement for dominical institution was to relocate the ritual life of the sacraments within the authority of the Scriptures. However, that relocation was not simply a matter of authority; it was also a matter

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8 McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 429.

9 Ibid., 430.

10 Luther initially included penance among the sacraments but changed his mind: “The sacrament of penance, which I added to these two [baptism and the supper], lacks the divinely instituted visible sign, and is...nothing but a way and a return to baptism” (LW:36:124).
of grace. For the Reformers, Scripture was not only the primary authorizing agent of the sacraments, but also the conduit for the divine grace which the Sacraments could confer.

B. Preaching as a Means of Grace

Preaching has never been numbered among the sacraments according to these classical definitions. In fact, in the medieval church, preaching often became separated from the mass entirely. Certainly preaching did not disappear, but it was done at other occasions, often by someone other than the parish priest.” Still, throughout Christian history, preaching, while not named a sacrament, has often been considered sacrament-al or a means of grace. Particularly among the Reformers, we can see distinct connections between the theologies of Word and those of sacrament. For instance, we view that preaching can be seen as conforming to the classical definitions of a sacrament: First, while preaching lacks an inert, physical sign like bread or water, one does sense the event through the hearing of speech. Paul said as much in Romans 10:17, “faith comes from hearing.” Second, human speech might be said to resemble divine speech. In the sacrament of Holy Communion, red wine or grace juice is used because of its physical resemblance to human blood. One might also think of the human speech of preaching as bearing a resemblance to divine speech, particularly considering that the biblical record reveals a Jesus who did much ministry through speech. If Jesus is fully divine and fully human, then preachers might be understood to share in Christ’s ministry through speech in the same way that celebrants share in Christ’s ministry in the cup. Third, preaching is frequently authorized by Christ in the gospels by his own example, by his command to his disciples, and by his commission to all who would

11 Laurence Hull Stookey, Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 76.
follow in his ministry. Fourth, preaching certainly seeks to convey the grace to which it
points, namely divine address and what it done by that address.

Our view is that Word and sacrament are not opposing forces in Christian worship; Christian preaching and sacraments pour forth from the same source (God’s Word) and mediate (through material) one and the same grace. Their differences are those of degree and not of kind. The theologies of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley will indicate the unity of grace in their theologies of Word and sacrament and move us to consider their origins in the hearing of a biblical text that is oriented toward the future (ENCOUNTER), that invites the hearer to consider a performance of God’s promise on the material plane (SUSPENSION), and ends in the transformation of human life and action (APPROPRIATION) by the gospel mediated by that text.

The thought of these Reformers spans two and a half centuries. Our analysis will not be exhaustive, nor will we pit one against another; rather our task here is, first, to examine how each Reformer views Word and sacrament as complementary impulses and second to note how each complements the others toward a theology of preaching that is sacramental in its insistence upon human appropriation.

III. Preaching As Sacramental

Unlike the more radical reformers, such as Ulrich Zwingli, who sought to drastically curtail sacramental theology and practice in response to Catholic excesses, Martin Luther and John Calvin maintained both a vibrant sacramental theology as well as a full-throated theology of gospel proclamation. B.A. Gerrish notes that some interpreters have suggested that, in terms of salvific efficacy, the Reformers merely substituted the Word as an “idealistic
sacrament” in place of the Eucharist with its “realistic, material, dinglich character” which works *ex opere operato*. To a point Gerrish agrees: “The truth in this suggestion is that the Protestants at the time of the Reformation really did transfer to the proclamation of the gospel the salvific efficacy medieval scholasticism ascribed to a sacrament.” He continues, however: “But they did not substitute the one for the other. They kept both and interpreted each in the light of the other.”\(^{12}\) The Reformation did not vault preaching over the sacraments in terms of their importance or efficacy; rather, Luther and Calvin vaulted scriptural authority over the ecclesial authority of the magisterium, seeking to restore to worship the basic gracious partnership between preaching and sacraments.

A. *Martin Luther*

Luther’s theology of Word and sacrament revolutionized hermeneutics to emphasize God’s decisive and present action in both preaching and liturgy. His insistence upon the initiative of God’s loving grace without requirement for human merit helps us to see both Word and sacraments as justifying gifts. We will see particularly in the early Luther a convergence of thought about both preaching and sacraments that emphasizes three ideas: first, both preaching and sacrament are a form of divine address to the human; second: both preaching and sacraments convey God’s Spirit through the “letter” of materiality; and third, God addresses humanity *today* through that material “letter.” Each of these ideas express the theology of God’s Word about which we have been concerned.

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Augustine’s sacramental formula was crucial to Luther’s thinking about sacraments: “Let the word be added to the element, and a sacrament results.”\textsuperscript{13} Lawrence Stookey relates that, for Luther, the sacraments are God’s acts in the church via the Word: “Eucharist is an ‘effective sign’; it communicates what it signifies, making Christ’s risen Presence effectively known in the church.”\textsuperscript{14} Nevertheless, the Eucharist does not communicate such grace automatically:

> It cannot be true, therefore, that there is contained in the sacraments a power efficacious for justification, or that they are ‘effective signs’ of grace. All such things are said to the detriment of faith, and out of ignorance of the divine promise. Unless you should call them ‘effective’ in the sense that they certainly and effectively impart grace where faith is unmistakably present.\textsuperscript{15}

The sacraments depend on God’s Word of promise as well as believing faith for their efficacy. Thus, Luther looks back through the outward expressions of preaching and sacraments to the inward dynamic of promise and faith. For God’s promise to have effect in an individual life it must be believed and trusted. One must have faith in the promise of God. This promise and receptive faith, for Luther, are the keys to both sacramental and homiletical effectiveness:

> Therefore let us open our eyes and learn to pay heed more to the word than to the sign, more to faith than to the word or use of the sign. We know that wherever there is a divine promise, there faith is required, and that these two are necessary to each other that neither can be effective apart from the other. For it is not possible to believe unless there is a promise, and the promise is not established unless it is believed. But where these two meet, they give a real and most certain efficacy of the sacraments.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{14} Stookey, Eucharist, 57.

\textsuperscript{15} The Babylonian Captivity of the Church [1520], in LW 36:66-67.

\textsuperscript{16} The Babylonian Captivity of the Church [1520], in LW 36:67.
i. The Multiple Meanings of “Word”

In chapter one, we had to wrestle a bit with various meanings of “word.” Because languages are what they are, we find it necessary to wrestle again. Luther uses “word” to denote several things, and we find it helpful to be clear about what he intends by “word.” When Luther invites us to “pay heed...more to faith [and promise] than to the word,” then what exactly is meant by “word” in this statement? Luther seems to be saying that, behind both the external word and the external sign, another internal force is effectively creating faith and maintaining it through those outer words and signs.

Jonathan Trigg has also noted that, “The priority of word over sacrament in Luther’s thought is commonly asserted.” Trigg proceeds throughout his monograph to understand what “word” means in Luther’s lexicon. He discovers three senses of “wort” as Luther uses it:

Sense 1: The external Word in distinction to the sacraments, the Word of preaching and of the biblical texts.

Sense 2: the Word that is Christ – the gospel without which the first sense is “lifeless.” This is the sense that unifies all the means of grace.

Sense 3: that particular Word of promise or command attached to an individual sign.

The sermon and the sacramental ritual are Words of God in that they are derived from God’s historical, actual Word of promise/command:

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17 Jonathan D Trigg, Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1994). 4. Trigg’s note on this idea points out several interpreters who have claimed the priority of Word over sacrament for Luther: Paul Avis, The Church in the Theology of the Reformers, pp. 16f.; H. Bornkamm, Luther’s World of Thought, pp. 93ff. – Bornkamm identifies sacraments as another form of Word; and unlike Word, potentially dispensable; Werner Jetter, pp. 191-195 – appears to suggest that “the sacraments are handicapped in some way by the physical nature which they share with the Old Testament signs”; Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, p. 346 – the sacraments are founded upon the Word, and therefore nothing without it.
Thus, for Luther, the Word is not a category confined to the biblical past; rather, what makes the sacraments (and preaching, for that matter) effective is that they convey the present promise of the gospel to the participants:

... *verbum* takes on a full-blooded dynamism. In baptism God’s Word of promise, far from being tied down to the moment of baptism, let alone to the dominical institution, is released into the present tense. God is active and present in baptism; his word is being spoken now. He acts, he is present, to be encountered—now.\(^{18}\)

That force behind the words of the sermon, of the sacrament and of the biblical text is the present Word of God in promise which is being spoken through the sensate words of the pastor or priest.

Robert Kolb also finds a polyvalent sense of “word” that includes both preaching and sacraments: “Luther believed that God is present in the various forms of his Word and that he exercises his power to claim and restore sinners through these forms, oral, written and sacramental.”\(^{19}\) One grace is revealed in both preaching and in the sacraments. That one

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 74.

grace is the divine promise made to us today as we hear the sermon and as we receive the sacraments. We take in and appropriate both through faith.

**ii. The Letter and Spirit of God’s Word in Bible and Sermon**

We find this sacramental understanding of the Word of God to be closely tied to Luther’s Scriptural hermeneutics of letter and spirit. When Luther seeks out the “letter” and “spirit” of the Scriptures he is referring to Paul’s use of these terms in 2 Corinthians 3:5-6: “Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (NRSV). Luther is also attempting to correct a system of reading (and thus preaching) the Scriptures that tended to pull apart language and meaning. In particular, the early Luther in his lectures on the Psalms stands over against certain “spiritual” readings of the text that result in fanciful analogy or anagogy: “In the Scriptures, therefore, no allegory, tropology, or anagogy is valid, unless the same truth is expressly stated historically elsewhere. Otherwise Scripture would become a mockery.”20 Indeed, different definitions of “letter” and “spirit” abound: The early church fathers and medievalists interpreted the Apostle Paul’s “letter” and “spirit” of 2 Cor. 3:6 (and Romans 7:6) with a variety of antithetical poles: “carnal and spiritual, visible and invisible, sensible and intelligible, manifest and concealed, inward and outward, lower and higher, human and divine, earthly and heavenly, temporal and eternal, present and future, untruth and truth.”21

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20 LW 10:4

But in his 1513 preface to the Lectures on the Psalms, Luther is self-consciously confronting this system and also offering an alternative. He seeks to steer the reader between two other sorts of interpreters who make faults in reading the Psalms; first, there are those who read without basic understanding of the common sense of the words being used; second, “the others are those who have a carnal understanding of the Psalms, like the Jews, who always apply the Psalms to ancient history apart from Christ. But Christ has opened the mind of those who are His so that they might understand the Scriptures.” So, here at the very beginning of Luther’s academic career is his notorious and regrettable anti-Semitism.

Attempting to look aside from this negative aspect of his thinking, we can see that, from the beginning, Christ is the interpretive key for Luther. He might not have yet received the full impact from Romans about justification by faith, but already Luther is insisting upon Jesus Christ as the hermeneutical key for interpreting the Scriptures.

The medieval system of four-fold interpretation sought to render obscure or unintelligible texts more plain with (what Luther considered to be fanciful) applications of texts, including the Psalms, to various aspects of spiritual life. The medieval purpose was to renew the capacity of those texts to bear something intelligible about God. However, for Luther, the best way to arrive at such a renewal is to discover the Christ-meaning, which in truth sometimes yielded no less fanciful readings than the four-fold medieval practice!

For instance, in his commentary on Psalm 16:5 - “The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot” (KJV) – Luther extends the literal meaning of “cup” and its potential contents. Of course, the psalm must be interpreted in some allegorical manner because God cannot literally be a portion of anything. Thus, far afield from the plain sense of the psalm, Luther finds an analogy between the cup/wine and the

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22 LW 10:3.
Scriptures. The cup is the Scriptures themselves, “especially of the Old Testament.” But the Scriptures contain the wine which is simultaneously (according to his reading of Psalm 75:8) “full of mixture” and yet “pure wine” – the letter and the spirit. How he proceeds from here is interesting. The cup of the Scriptures holds the wine of the gospel which is only discernible by faith. The one who “drinks” the gospel story through the letter of the Scriptures, without righteousness, drinks “snow, ice, brimstone, that is, the letter…” The godly one who drinks the gospel story in faith receives “two parts in the spirit:” first, mercy, peace, good things, the benefits of Christ; and second, the cross, judgment, and the sufferings of Christ. For Luther, the difference between a reading in the letter and in the spirit is righteous relationship with God rooted in faith.

One might read this psalm a hundred times and never find this meaning in the referents of the actual psalm. On the surface this reading appears to be simply another example of medieval, analogical exegesis. Psalm 16 does not explicitly refer to Scriptures as writings. Rather, it is a paean to God which contains stark contrasts between the Jewish “saints” and those who “hasten after another God” (vss. 3 and 4). Specifically, it is about how God has practiced goodness toward the Jewish righteous: “the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places”; God has “given me understanding.” For Luther, that goodness actually refers to the specific form of the spiritual, Scriptural witness to Christ. Only the “letter” of the Psalm is about the Jews’ relationship with Yahweh. The true “spirit” of the psalm is that God has chosen to redraw the lines and give fresh counsel to those who inherit faith in God through Christ. That realignment actually occurs in Scriptural interpretation. That is the Christ-meaning of this psalm and, for Luther, is the plain sense of it. Thus, in quite ugly
ways, Luther turns this celebration of Yahweh’s blessing of her own people against them. To follow the truly literal sense of the psalm (i.e. what the author intended) is, for Luther, a reading by the letter or “brimstone.” Also note that the Christ-faithful receive the two-fold “spiritual” interpretation: law and gospel = judgment and mercy of Christ.

To be very clear, while we are not validating Luther’s exegesis here, we do find theological value in that here, at the beginning of his career, we find some of the elements of Luther’s later hermeneutics present: A use of analogy that ties Scriptural meaning to Christ and which opens up the contrast of “letter” and “spirit” toward discerning law and gospel. We are also noting some similarities between his scriptural hermeneutics and his sacramental theology: 1) Both derive their authority from the person and promises of Jesus Christ either by institution or by interpretation; 2) both convey an internal message or Word to be received by faith; 3) both have an external "sign" – the sacraments have a physical token while the Scriptures have word-images, and both have meanings made contemporary in either the performance of the liturgy or the preaching of a sermon. Ricoeur might say that the reader/hearer ENCOUNTERS the letter of the text, but, in a moment of internal SUSPENSION, the message of the text is found to have a contemporary spiritual meaning, perhaps even several meanings.

Luther’s comments on Psalm 45:1 confirm these aspects of his hermeneutics: “My heart overflows with a goodly theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.”

Luther draws out several contrasts in this verse. First, he distinguishes between “uttering” good news and “pouring out” the same, the latter being a matter of emotional intensity born from the work of the spirit in one’s heart. The psalmist

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25 New Revised Standard Version translation – this is closer to Luther’s usage than the KJV.
26 LW 10:211
equates the tongue with the pencil, both of which “inscribe” in their own ways, the first to speech, the latter to paper. But, the tongue-speech and the pencil-writing are not the essence of communication. Rather, the message is conveyed by these conduits. The “letter” of speech and writing serve the “spirit” of interior, emotional reception. Luther does not say so, but Ricoeur might say that both the “letter” meaning and the contemporary environment must be suspended and held at bay in favour of a new set of correspondences that include both the figures of the text and the figures of one’s own life. The emotional intensity is connected, then, to God’s work in the Spirit and one’s openness and perception of that fact, i.e. faith. In this way, says Luther, all Scripture is essentially the same whether gospel or prophetic book. God can break it open and bring it to fruition in the hearer’s life; God can use any text as a “pencil” to write a direct address to the believer.

Behind all of these assertions stands the Word of God in all of its various forms: the Bible as the potential Word of God, Christ himself the Word, Christ’s Word of promise to the believer, and the Word as a summons to faith. And, just as with the sacraments, God brings all of these forms to bear on human lives in the present. The “spirit” cannot be conveyed or communicated without the material “letter” which functions as a body in time. Just as we meet people in different contexts and act with / react to them in different ways depending on those contexts, so also the “spirit” or meaning conveyed by the “letter” or body of the text may, perhaps even must, become fresh as it is born into each new situation. Luther comments on Ps. 119:125 – I am Thy servant; give me understanding that I may know Thy testimonies.:

He prays for understanding against the letter, because the spirit is understanding. But as the times increased, so also the letter and the spirit. For what sufficed them for understanding then is now the letter to us. For, as I said above, the letter is now with us in a more subtle form than it was formerly. And this because of progress. For, as I said, everyone who moves forward forgets what is behind him, which is for him the letter, and he reaches out to what is before him, which for him is the spirit. For always what is possessed is the letter in relation to what is to be acquired, as we said about motion.
Thus the article of the Trinity as expressed in the time of Arius was spirit and given to few, but it is now the letter, because it has been revealed, unless we, too, add something, namely, a living faith in the Trinity. Therefore we must always pray for understanding, so that we do not become dull in the killing letter. If we are the children of God, we must always be in the process of birth. Hence it is said, "He who is born of God does not sin" (1 John 3:9), but his birth from God preserves him. As the Son is always in God from eternity and is born into eternity, so we also must always be born, renewed, and reborn.\(^\text{28}\)

For Luther, interpretation is crucial and yet ephemeral; once God has spoken through the Word into our present condition and we own an interpretation as true, then that fresh, spiritual Word begins to recede into the past, crusting over once again into a human possession or “letter.” And yet, God is always asking, seeking, and knocking through the material forms of the Word of God to speak anew, to address us in every context. This is true in the Word of preaching and also in the Word of the sacrament, both of which are material forms or “bodies” through which we come to understand something just beyond the grasp of our dull experience. As we saw with DI, God’s promise of sure support to the Davidic monarchy is taken up by the prophet and reinterpreted or “reborn” into DI’s own context. The killing “letter” of the original promise is broken open some centuries later to reveal a new “spirit” through God’s election of the whole nation of Israel.

iii. Letter and Spirit of God’s Word in Sermon and Sacrament

In his 1522 essay “Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament,” Luther is attempting to calm his readers and reassure those that are either too afraid or feel too guilty to touch the elements of the Eucharist. When Luther says that the Word is “above the sacrament,” he does not mean that preaching is more important than liturgy; he is saying that the spiritual communication from God to the believer is the predicate for that communication through material:

\(^{28}\) LW 11:497
A Christian should know that there is nothing more holy on earth than God’s Word, for even the sacrament itself is constituted and sanctified and consecrated through God’s Word, and all of us have received our spiritual birth from the Word and were consecrated as Christians by it. The Word sanctifies everything, and is above the sacrament (insofar as the sacrament admits of being grasped with the hands). If a Christian nevertheless less embraces that Word with this mouth and with his ears and with his heart, yes, with his whole life, why should he not dare also to touch that which is consecrated by the Word?  

Luther does not explicitly say so, but we would hazard that he might include preaching under this rubric of “sacrament.” The intention of God’s Word is that it be embraced by mouth, yes; but the Word may also be embraced with the ear and the heart. The Word of God is available to be appropriated. However, we can be clear to say that Luther would not put the onus on hearers to make God’s Word their own. Rather, Ricoeur’s understanding of appropriation seems akin to Luther’s in this way: “Appropriation is also and primarily a ‘letting go’.” For Ricoeur, as for Luther we suspect, interpretation is about relinquishment, about accepting the concerns of the text into one’s contemporary experience as the text interprets us. In another essay of the same time (1523), he addresses the questions of substantiation: how is it that the body and blood of Christ become really present to the believer:

“...lay hold on the words: ‘This is my body which is given for you.’ And so forth. Eat and drink there, and nourish your faith, then take also the body and blood as tokens of these words of God. And say to yourself: I am not commanded to investigate or to know how God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, or how the soul of Christ is in the sacrament. For me it is enough to know that the Word which I hear and the body which I receive are truly the Word and body of my Lord and God. Let the subtle and unbelieving sophists inquire about such secondary matters and employ their magic to bring deity into the sacrament. The body which you receive, the Word which you hear, are the body and Word of him who holds the whole world in his hand and who inhabits it from beginning to end. Let this be sufficient for you.”

In other words, the rain of God’s Word falls upon the earth and upon the seed and the seed takes up that gospel water that “the seed should spring and grow up, [the farmer]

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29 LW 36:244-245.


31 LW 36:297-298.
knoweth not how” (Mark 4:27, KJV). One might similarly ask, “How does preaching work? How does it communicate God’s contemporaneous Word to the hearer?” Ultimately, we know not how one comes to appropriate the gospel, but this is sure to Luther: that God’s grace in the Eucharist is conferred through hearing the prayer of consecration and actually participating in the ritual by standing up, moving forward, receiving it into the hand and mouth, ingesting the elements. Luther in this essay is combating the same fears and unworthiness that led to the practice of “ocular communion,” that practice of visually adoring the species of host and cup at their elevation in the mass as sufficient to having received them. We assert that there is a similar homiletical danger when the preacher is laying bare the gospel, rhetorically elevating the presence of Christ, offering Christ to the people, inviting their response, even addressing them as if to say, “Here. Here in this very sermon is my body broken for you.” Hearing alone is insufficient. The Word must be received into the imagination and contemporized and owned. Our question is how might one preach in such a way as to indicate God’s presence with such contextual clarity that the hearer might appropriate the Word of God into their own bodies and incarnate the Word themselves as “little Christs.”

iv. The Ubiquity of God’s Word in Sacrament and Sermon

While we will not engage in the historical quarrels over the question of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, the intersections between Luther’s theology of preaching and his theology of the sacraments are interesting to note at two important points. First, the presence of Christ is ubiquitous at both the Eucharist and in the sermon. At the table, every table, during the mass Christ is really present. Stookey notes, “In the bread and wine we discover
the presence of Christ that we ought to see every day in everything good around us....The body of Christ is given to believers ‘in, with, and under’ the physical bread of the Lord’s Table.”  

We posit that the speech of God, too, might be said to be ubiquitous and given to believers ‘in, with, and under’ the words of the sermon. Second, in the Lutheran view the finite ritual and the finite sermon are each capable of bearing the fullness of Christ’s infinity. This is, after all, “exactly what happened in the incarnational union of God with the humanity of Jesus.”

In summary, we find in Luther’s theology a union of sermon and liturgy via the Word which authorizes and enlivens both as acts of God in the present tense. The Word of God has divine and human involvement, neither one separable from the other; the Word of God has internal and external forms neither one separable from the other; the Word of God has past and present dimensions, neither one separable from the other; the Word of God has both material and spiritual dimensions, neither one separable from the other; the Word of God issues from the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, neither one separable from the other. What Luther gives to us is a sacramental understanding of God’s Word that emphasizes that the encounter with God’s Word (whether through the sacramental prayers and liturgy or through the sermon) reveals that the inert letter of the biblical text has present, lively implications. So, while Luther’s hermeneutics give us excellent ways to understand our encounter with the text and the attendant suspension to imagine a contemporary set of meanings, Luther does not offer to us a robust theology of God’s Word as appropriated into

32 Stookey, Eucharist, 53.

33 Carl E. Braaten, Principles of Lutheran Theology (Fortress Press, 1983), 93.
human life. We will turn now to John Calvin and then to John Wesley, as an interpreter of Calvin, to help us flesh out.

B. John Calvin

John Calvin advocates a mediating position between Luther and Zwingli concerning Christ’s presence in the sacraments. That mediating position modifies Luther’s theology of the Word and sacrament by locating the spiritual work in preaching and sacraments as much in the receiver as in the giver or the elements. Where Luther believes that the risen Christ is ubiquitous and available among us on the altar table, here and now, Zwingli instead teaches that Christ’s risen body is only in heaven, there to be contemplated by projecting the mind. The sacraments are only memory aids: “...they are but ‘bare signs’ (Latin: signa nuda)—at best ‘props for faith’ that reinforce but do not create awareness of Christ with us.”34 Calvin on the one hand agrees with Zwingli about the location of Christ’s body, and on the other he agrees with Luther about the real presence of Christ’s body; he asserts that “[t]he Eucharistic presence is the work of the Holy Spirit, who mysteriously unites us with Christ in the heavenly banquet.”35 The Spirit, somehow, lifts us up to heaven where the sign is effective and the truth of the thing signified is made present. This location of the Spirit’s work in the life of the believer is significant because it allows a sense overlap of God’s active imagination in the form of the Holy Spirit with the human imagination. Each may be distinguished from the other, and we may affirm God’s initiative toward human incapacity.

34 Stookey, Eucharist, 57.

35 Ibid., 59.
And yet, interpretation, communication, and meaning may be made in the hidden recesses of human life.

i. The “Sacramental Word” of God

On the relationship of Word to sacrament, Calvin’s theology significantly overlaps with Luther and for this reason we will not spend an inordinate amount of time with his thought. However, there are some key ideas which add to our discussion of appropriation. Augustine’s formula (Let the Word be added to the element, and a sacrament results) is also key to understanding Calvin’s thought. But Calvin gives even greater priority to Word than does Luther when it comes to understanding baptism. Preaching should interpret the elemental signs of the sacrament so that they may be understood and believed:

You see how the sacrament requires preaching to beget faith. And we need not labor to prove this when it is perfectly clear what Christ did, what he commanded us to do, what the apostles followed, and what the purer church observed. Indeed, it was known even from the beginning of the world that whenever God gave a sign to the holy patriarchs it was inseparably linked to doctrine, without which our senses would have been stunned in looking at the bare sign. Accordingly, when we hear the sacramental word mentioned, let us understand the promises, proclaimed in a clear voice by the minister, to lead the people by the hand wherever the sign tends and directs us. 36

For Calvin, the sacraments function as an authenticating, sensible “seal” on the promises shared in the preached Word of God. 37 But the seal alone cannot suffice. Our senses, “stunned” by the bare sign of the elements, require the promises mediated by what Calvin terms the “sacramental word” to guide and direct us to the best explanation of the signs. One could interpret this reference to the “sacramental word” in a couple of different ways. We might understand this term simply as the doctrinal words of explanation that accompany the ritual of the sacrament and frame the event. Or, we might understand, with Gerrish, that


37 Ibid., 1280 (4.14.5).
Calvin means the Word that not only explains the sacrament but constitutes and makes the sacrament.\textsuperscript{38} One might, however, discover in this phrase an even deeper and more resonant meaning as per Gerrish: that the Word of God itself has sacramental qualities, that the external word of preaching (or presumably of the biblical text) itself functions in a manner similar to how the Medieval church conceived of the functions and effects of the sacraments. Thus, Gerrish notes, we may extend the definition of the sacramental word to that “proclamation that not only makes a sacrament but also, as an efficacious means of grace, is a sacrament.”\textsuperscript{39} Preaching itself is an appropriation of grace.

This latter idea points beyond the word-as-mere-explanation, an idea that has a sort of Zwinglian character to it, toward a deeper spiritual mystery that, to us, comports with Calvin’s Eucharistic theology. Just as the Holy Spirit mysteriously raises humanity heavenward in the Eucharist to experience Christ’s real and risen presence, so also the Holy Spirit opens our inner “ears” to hear the divine address of the Word:

...the Lord teaches and instructs us by his Word. Secondly, he confirms it by the sacraments. Finally, he illumines our minds by the light of his Holy Spirit and opens our hearts to the Word and sacraments to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within.\textsuperscript{40}

Just as the senses may be stunned by the sacramental elements, they can also be stunned by the sermon! The Spirit works both in the preacher and in the hearer to make heard the Word of God. Let us note that all of this good theology on preaching is coming from the section of the \textit{Institutes} on the sacraments!

What we discover in this review is that, for both Luther and Calvin, theology of Word and theology of sacrament are intimately connected, both theologies working out in practical

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\textsuperscript{38} Gerrish, \textit{Grace and Gratitude}, 85.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 85–86.
\textsuperscript{40} Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, 1284 (4.14.8).
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terms as divine communication with humanity, the aim of which is transformed life: appropriation.⁴¹ For both men, the Word of God was the primary category: God’s initiating, gracious speech that takes, among us, external forms. The preeminent form of God’s self-communicating Word is Jesus Christ. Another form of God’s Word is the Bible: God’s speech and actions in history as witnessed and witnessed to by the biblical authors and redactors. Both preaching and sacraments are also enacted, ritual forms of the Word, authorized by Jesus’ command and practice in the written Word, the Scriptures.⁴²

C. John Wesley

The sacramental theology of John and Charles Wesley further modifies and complements the positions of Luther and Calvin by establishing the purpose of God’s initiative to humanity in Word and sacraments. Luther’s thought on the “letter” and the “spirit” of the text enlighten our application of Ricoeur’s thinking about metaphor and the ENCOUNTER with texts in general. Calvin’s assertion that the Holy Spirit is at work in both the sacrament and the recipient (or the preacher and the hearer) helps us to understand appropriation as the work of God through the Holy Spirit within the human heart and not as a

⁴¹ A key distinction between the Calvin and Luther regards the relationship between the material order and the spiritual order. Does the finite have the capacity to contain or mediate the infinite? In terms of the Eucharist, does the material (i.e. bread or wine) have the capacity to bear the spiritual presence of the divine? In the mass, does God become really present locally in the consecrated bread on the altar table? Luther spent much time and many words advocating that, yes, the bread on the table is Christ’s immanent body; the finite can bear the infinite. For Calvin, Christ’s body is ascended and in heaven on high; The celebrant does not bring God down to the altar table; rather, in the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit mysteriously raises the spirit of the believer to Christ in heaven to commune with God spiritually, thereby overcoming the barrier of distance. The finite is not capable of bearing the infinite. Calvin’s primary concern here is to preserve the transcendence of God as other than material, as different from humanity. This concern was also evident in Calvin’s theology of preaching as well. In terms of divine self-communication in both word-forms (preaching and sacrament) Calvin and Luther seek to strike a balance between spiritual transcendence with material immanence; Calvin privileges the former, Luther the latter.

⁴² Both theologians also advocated weekly observance of the Eucharist (though this, contra Calvin’s desire, was not often maintained in the Reformed tradition). See Stookey, Eucharist, 60.
work which we might accomplish unaided. SUSPENSION is that mode of God’s Spirit at work in the human imagination to consider the possibility of renewed capacity to respond to God. However, we think that the end of preaching and the end of sacramental acts, both within and beyond Christian worship, is real change in human life toward Christ-likeness. We therefore turn to Wesley to fund a more fulsome theology of God’s Word as APPROPRIATION in both sermon and sacramental(s).

i. Wesley and Arminianism

As we said earlier, John Wesley was an interpreter of Calvin. He was an Arminian Calvinist which makes a tremendous difference in the way we understand human participation in the gracious work of God. We will briefly consider what Arminianism means in Wesley’s context.

John Wesley (1703-1791) was born in England 139 years following Calvin’s death. The intervening years saw Calvinism in various forms become ascendant in Great Britain. The Presbyterianism of John Knox, the Reformed movements within Anglicanism and the Arminian modifications to Calvin’s theology supporting the 18th century evangelical revival in Britain indicate that Reformed theology, in varying forms, was ubiquitous. Wesley and

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43 Arminianism refers to the theological successors to Dutch Reformed theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) who sought to modify Calvin’s famous five points. The hallmark of Calvin’s theological interest was the preservation of God’s sovereignty over against human participation in the salvation of humanity. Each of the five classical points of Calvin’s theology signals the importance of God’s sovereignty in the face of humanity’s incapability: 1) Humanity is totally depraved and incapable of response to the sovereign God; 2) certain people are unconditionally elected by God to salvation and the rest to eternal damnation apart from the exercise of their will; 3) the atonement of Christ is limited to those predestined to salvation; 4) the grace of the sovereign God is irresistible; and 5) through faith, the elect will persevere to eternal salvation. Arminius developed doubts about Calvin’s system while attempting to defend Calvin’s formulations. Arminius’ own study of the Scriptures led him to modify Calvin’s points significantly: 1) Humanity is indeed totally depraved, but grace is prevenient. Part of the atoning work of Christ was to enable humanity to make a free will response to God; 2) Election is conditional based on the faith or the lack thereof; 3) The atonement of Christ is for all people but is only effective through belief. 4) God’s grace is resistible; 5) And resistible to the point of apostasy.
his brother, Charles, were Arminians whose distinctive evangelical concerns led to both a renewal in preaching and also emphasized participation in the sacraments as key to Christian faith and life. Because certain Arminian emphases are crucial to Wesley’s understanding of the relationship of Word and sacrament, we will consider the key differences between the theology of John Calvin and Wesley’s appropriation of Jacobus Arminius’ theology. The primary effect of Arminius’ adjustment to Calvin is to raise humanity’s stock as a partner with God in the prospect of salvation. While God certainly remains sovereign as the initiator of grace, human beings are not merely passive receivers of grace and righteousness. Rather, human beings are response-able and must participate in God’s sanctifying work. Also, humanity can refuse God’s grace, a stance which God deplores and yet allows, preserving human freedom.

John Wesley and his brother Charles (1707-1788) are the primary proponents of Arminianism in European and North American theology since the 18th century. The Wesleys’ appropriation of Arminius infused the theological and practical system known as Methodism, whose name implies the practice of certain methods as essential to Christian spirituality. Not only is the finite capable of bearing the infinite in Wesleyan thought, human participation (appropriation) in certain practices (means of grace) is essential to the work of grace. As an Anglican, Wesley held to the via media principles which steered a course between the sacramental foundations of the Roman church and the proclamation of the Word of God so key to the Reformed Church. But Wesley’s chief concern was to awaken living faith not only through an objective sense of holiness (Word and sacrament as present in the church)

but also through a *subjective* holiness, a piety born from a personal relationship with God fostered by external, practical methods. Because humanity is *able* to appropriate God’s sanctifying work, Wesley increasingly emphasized the means of grace throughout his ministry as conduits for people to sense and experience God’s grace. Thus, for Wesley, both the sacraments and the sacramental rites named in the Scriptures and appropriated by the Church in history became more and more important to the practice of Christian faith and to the nature of the Church.

**ii. Wesley and the Sacramental Word as a Practice of Appropriation**

What, then, should we understand as the relation between Word and sacrament in Wesleyan theology? The key distinction between the Wesleys and the other Reformers with whom we are concerned is that, while Luther and Calvin both find the Word of God as constitutive of the sacraments from the point of view of *speculative* theology, the Wesleys view Word and sacrament from a more *practical* point of view as two practices among many through which God works to confer grace.45 Whereas with Luther and Calvin, preaching and the sacraments are derivative of the Word, Wesley’s emphasis on the practical places preaching (and all devotional, ritual practices) as at least equally derivative of the sacramental as of the Word.

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45 We are not claiming here that Wesley did not view preaching as foundational to Christian ministry, nor are we proposing that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are simply two options for Christian practice equal in importance to others. Rather, we are claiming that the Wesleys extend the both/and logic of the Anglican middle way. Word and sacrament (or the sacramentals) are not practices suitable only inside the established church and dispensed by authorized clergy; grace is not an either/or proposition; it is a both/and experience. Wesleyan rhetoric is famously full of these both/ands: holiness through both personal devotion and social action; both knowledge and vital piety; both present and future salvation; both God’s providence and human freedom. God’s grace is at work in both clergy and lay preaching; grace is at work in preaching both in the church and in the field. Grace is manifest in both the duly administered elements of the Lord’s Supper and in the love feast, a very different sacramental experience. Wesley would never claim the latter as equal in importance to the former, but that as a practice, flatly, it worked.
In Wesley’s adaptation of the Articles of Religion, he defines the Church as “a congregation of faithful men [sic] in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance.” Preaching, baptism and the Lord’s Supper form the heart of what Wesley called the “instituted” means of grace. However, as in the Roman church, they are the touchstones by which all other means are measured. The list of the means in his sermon, “The Means of Grace” (1746) are prayer, searching the Scriptures and the Lord’s Supper. Ole Borgen indicates that, in the sixty-eight locations where two or more means are listed, these three plus fasting and Christian conference are most frequently named. Wesley admits that fasting and prayer were not “enjoined” by Christ but were quickly established in the primitive Church. What is to be noted here is that in terms of the theological marks of the church, Wesley is clearly aligned with classical definitions of Word and Sacrament; however, in practical terms, Wesley’s lists mix the instituted means among other particular means with little distinction. Further, the “prudential” means of grace extend the sacramental principle to the common sense and judgment (the prudence) of each individual Christian. To be sure, Wesley would never say that there were more than two sacraments. But Wesley strongly held that God offers grace

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freely through many practices that are both individual and corporate, both self-concerned and other-concerned, both mind-convincing and heart-warming.

Preaching, then, is one embodied practice among many through which God communicates pardon and power to the individual. Nevertheless, Wesley identified preaching as the key moment in the worship of God where faith is created and sustained: “It is true the Word of God is the chief, ordinary means, whereby he changes both the hearts and lives of sinners....”51 But, preaching is not alone in this among the means, according to Borgen:

“...it is possible to express the specific function of the means in general terms: if fasting and prayer are preparatory means, and as such, indispensable, then God’s Word, preached, heard, read and meditated upon, may be termed a convicting, converting and confirming ordinance. At Wesley’s time the Lord’s Supper was usually considered the chief and superior confirming ordinance. But experience taught Wesley differently, and he affirmed it to be a converting ordinance as well.52

Unlike the Reformers, Wesley never subordinated the sacrament to the Word and considers all the means to be vitally important to God’s extension of grace in all its forms.

iii. God’s Word as a Source for Both Relative Change and Real Change

We see in Wesley’s thought and practice a synthesis of the Roman sacramental impulse with the evangelical concerns of the Reformers.53 Wesley corrects the Catholic sacramental system by denying any sense of ex opere operato to these ritual and devotional acts.54 The means of grace are only and always the work of Christ and not in human control.

On the other hand, Wesley also corrects what he perceives to be an overemphasis on

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52 Borgen, John Wesley on the Sacraments, 119.
54 Wesley, John Wesley’s Sermons, 170. See also Borgen, John Wesley on the Sacraments, 99.
justification and the *sola scriptura* principles of the Reformation to the detriment of the doctrine of sanctification:

“There has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conceptions of it? In order to be thoroughly convinced of this, of his total ignorance with regard to sanctification, there needs no more than to read over, without prejudice, his celebrated comment on the Epistle to the Galatians. On the other hand, how many writers of the Romish Church (as Francis Sales and Juan de Castaniza, in particular) have wrote strongly and scripturally on sanctification, who, nevertheless, were entirely unacquainted with the nature of justification! insomuch that the whole body of their Divines at the Council of Trent, in their Catechismus ad Parochos, (Catechism which every parish Priest is to teach his people,) totally confound sanctification and justification together. But it has pleased God to give the Methodists a full and clear knowledge of each, and the wide difference between them.”

Our opinion is that Wesley practices what Calvin “preached:” the true freedom of a sovereign God, a Holy Spirit who will “have mercy as God will have mercy; He will convey whatsoever seemeth him good by whatsoever means He is pleased to appoint.”

God’s work may not be confined to any single or set of means; in fact, it makes sense that for those who have never experienced the sacraments within the worship life of the church that grace *must* be available through some other means to empower them to respond with curiosity about the church or God. Wesley’s views on the response-ability of grace implies that all forms of divine self-communication, whether via sacrament or sermon, are aimed at empowering *real* change in the believer (and thus in the culture and community of the believer) and not only a *relative* change in the relationship between God and the recipient of grace. The telos of grace is ethical behaviour on the part of humans: love of God and neighbour “shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.”

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56 Ibid., 5:351.

preached) and in the sacrament(al) (both instituted and prudential), we discover God’s freedom working in and through creation to the point of human freedom.

That real change, for Wesley, is a full-body experience, a reformation of both the will and the works of people, and that change is by no means solely an event or experience of the individual imagination. Rather, God’s Word is a “social” word as is oft-repeated of Wesley throughout his lengthy career. As early as 1739, in his preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, Wesley writes (as would be appropriate for a book used in corporate Christian worship):

> Solitary religion is not to be found [in the Gospel of Christ]. “Holy solitaries” is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. “Faith working by love” is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.  

We may recognize a dual aspect in the “social” character of Wesley’s Methodism, one inner and one outer that reflects that total sense of appropriation about which we are most concerned.  

Our internal growth in grace and knowledge of God’s Word comes to us from others, perhaps a community which speaks to us, teaches us, and inspires us. In this sense God’s Word is “alien” to us, as Luther would say. That Word reveals all that God has done for us, as Wesley would say, preveniently and to justify us with God. But the arc of grace continues; God’s Word is also social in that God extends love through us, through our bodies, our work, and our action. The good news about Jesus becomes our own in our own contexts.

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iv. The Necessity of Christian Action

Still Wesley is full of warning that the “dry leaf” of practice itself is similar to a dead text: “It is in itself a poor, dead, empty thing…” And yet this husk of practice has often been the “channel” through which “the grace of God is conveyed.” Wesley termed this emphasis on practice, after the Apostle Paul, “working out” your salvation. In a late Wesley sermon (1785) of the name, Wesley addresses a verse from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (2:12-13 KJV). Wesley sorts out the relationship between God’s prevenient action for us and God’s sanctifying action in us to the point of our own embodied response.

Wesley imagines an interlocutor asking, “…If it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do, what need is there of our working? Does not his working thus supersede the necessity of our working at all? …For if we allow that God does all, what is there left for us to do?” Wesley responds that there is a close connection between God’s action and human action. First, God works; therefore we can work. We are only capable of good work because God has made it possible. Wesley, after all, did accept Calvin’s doctrine of the total depravity of humanity, thereby rendering it impossible for people to “do anything well.” However, God has preveniently quickened the dead, human spirit by offering grace universally, healing for the broken soul:

Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Everyone has sooner or later good desires, although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root or produce any considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering

60 Wesley, John Wesley’s Sermons, 170.
61 Ibid., 167.
62 Ibid., 490.
ray….no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath….We know indeed that word of his to be absolutely true, “Without me ye can do nothing.” But on the other hand we know, every believer can say, “I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me.”

Next, God works, therefore we must work, “otherwise [God] will cease working.”

Relationship with God is much like relationship among people. The relationship must be cared for, nurtured, and grown in varying and successive degrees of response to one another. Salvation, for Wesley, is not merely something accomplished for us in the past through the Christ-event; salvation is a *process* whereby we become, now and in the future, empowered by God’s Spirit to act differently. Wesley quotes Augustine in defense of this claim: “Even St. Augustine, who is generally supposed to favour the contrary doctrine, makes the just remark, *Qui fecit nos sine nobis, non salvabit nos sine nobis*: ‘he that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves.’”

For Mr. Wesley, God is at work in us to heal us so that we may respond, with God’s steady help, to God’s Word. To resist God’s work in our souls to help us appropriate what God has made possible through action would be like hearing the words of institution at Holy Communion and the invitation to receive the elements but then, at best, simply staring back at the priest, or, at worst, turning around and walking out. Or blessing the water for baptism and withholding the baby. Preaching and the sacraments convey not only a Word from God about what God has done *for* us in the past; they also, together, convey a Word about what God wants to do *in* us and *through* us, now and in the future. The symbol system of Christian worship, when experienced, is that place where God speaks through flesh, via appropriation, yet again.

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63 Ibid., 491.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
Chapter 5  
My Word Shall Not Return to Me Empty: Appropriation As God’s Word in the Field of Homiletics

We propose in this chapter that the telos of Christian proclamation is sanctification, people living out bodily the results of Christ’s gracious action. We also propose that this emphasis is a feature of the appropriated Word of God. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley hold our focus to this end from a historical and theological point of view. Paul Ricoeur does the same from a hermeneutical and ethical point of view. In this chapter, we will review literature at the boundary of homiletics and liturgics to perceive similar emphases. We recognize that the New Homiletic has certainly done well to foster encounters with God and God’s promise, but that the New Homiletic has often eschewed application in favour of letting people figure it out for themselves. We will enumerate the reasons why such an approach could be warranted. Nevertheless, we offer that preaching in a sacramental mode will “water” the imagination with possibilities for embodied appropriation and will invite co-operation with God without prescribing it.

We will examine the shared border of the fields of New Homiletical and liturgical theology to discover how a sacramental approach to preaching will lead preachers toward a greater concern for individual and social appropriation of the divine action encoded into the biblical text. We will hear ideas from several pioneers of the New Homiletic (David Buttrick, Charles Rice, Henry Mitchell, Fred Craddock, H. Grady Davis) as well as homileticians and theologians who have extended the New Homiletic into the 21st century (Paul Scott Wilson, Walter Brueggemann, Charles Campbell, Gordon Lathrop, Jennifer Lord). Additionally we will examine several Roman Catholic scholars whose sacramental theologies deeply resonate
with the New Homiletic and assist to carry our thinking further in the direction of
appropriation (William Skudlarek, Cypriano Vagaggini, Ernest Skublics, Mary Catherine
Hilkert, Karl Rahner, and Paul Janowiak).

We believe that the authority of the biblical text as God’s Word is not authenticated
by fiat or by any ecclesial ideology; rather, God’s Word is authenticated in responsive action
and in sanctification when the inert letter of the biblical text is broken open in preaching to
reveal a second order of biblical reference that engages our minds, our bodies and the whole
community of hearers. The text, in Ricoeurian terms, not only descends to us via a reference
to the past, but primarily refers to the possible worlds of the future which any person or
group may appropriate by cooperating with the Word of God’s ascent into embodied
experience (e.g. personal testimony, just behaviours or commitments).

In each preceding chapter we have considered a different facet of the concept of
appropriation as a feature of God’s Word. Also, in each chapter we have discovered that
God’s Word accommodates a transposition through a phase of hiddenness or “camouflage.”
God’s Word is revealed to us from an alien source and enters our prefigured lives where its
linguistic force must pass through the dimensions of our lives. In doing so, it does not remain
unaltered. God’s Word becomes bent toward our capacities and yet still bends us with its
language toward its own ends.

In the first chapter, we discovered in the biblical text from Isaiah 55 that God’s Word
“descends” from its divine origin like rain and waters the earth and “ascends” in
appropriation through its hearers. God commits God’s self in promise toward humanity and
that promise, upon entering human experience, is bent toward a call; God’s promise
functions as a summons; it is not a demand, but rather a seductive request for consideration.
We also deduced that human appropriation of God’s Word, while certainly related to divine intention, may not fulfill that intention with automatic precision. Rather, God’s Word works in human life by being moulded to it and yet also moulding that which it touches.

Chapter two clarified the general hermeneutics at play behind this subset of religious hermeneutics. Paul Ricoeur explained how poetic forms of discourse fund the individual imagination with possibilities for present and future appropriation via the second order of reference. Ricoeur also noted that imagination also functions on a social level revealed in the dialectic of ideology and utopia. On both levels, we observed an encounter with a narrative which triggered a suspension from the normal course of action. On the individual level, this suspension occurs below a line of camouflage in the conscience; God’s Word goes “underground,” if you will. There, the reproductive imagination populates the mind with images and schema from the narrative and then produces new correspondences allowed by the individual’s horizon of experience. In chapter three, we offered that, for preaching, the social locus of liturgical worship might be understood as the church’s collective “conscience” where images are both reproduced and new correspondences produced. In this way, we might say that liturgical worship both reveals and camouflages God’s Word in its playful and yet quite serious arts. However, on both the individual and social level the telos of the poetic work (in our case, the biblical texts) is action in the world made possible as the images from the alien work become one’s own via appropriation.

In chapter four, we returned to the specific hermeneutics of Christianity at the point of the concept of a sacrament, and we considered the theology of certain Reformers to examine the nature of a sacrament, in particular the sacramental nature of God’s Word as appropriation. There, we noted the similarities between preaching and the sacraments which
“add” the Word to the material object to convey meaning and opportunity for participation with the material symbol itself. ¹ Here, too, language both camouflages and reveals meaning through a material symbol. We also noted how this comported with Martin Luther’s hermeneutical ideas about the “letter” and the “spirit” of the biblical text. The text camouflages meaning that must consistently be renewed via interpretation to reveal a fresh address from God. We also extended Luther’s thinking toward the ministerial practice of John Wesley whose insistence upon the sanctifying qualities of God’s Word push us toward an understand of God’s Word as funding an appropriated sense of holiness, a goodness and a Godliness made possible through Christian preaching.

We may now move ahead to consider this “descent” and “ascent” of God’s Word through the facet of the homiletical field and, in particular, its shared border with liturgics. “Appropriation” is not a word used in contemporary homiletics. Many preachers instead tend to think of the “application” of the concerns of the text. But this word, while it has enjoyed a long rhetorical life, is problematic. It assumes that the preacher knows the best response and how hearers “should,” “ought,” or “must” act. Therefore the preacher can apply a layer of ethical behaviour onto the passive listener like so much paint onto a fence. Appropriation, on the other hand, is a more hearer-responsive project, and consists of that action that the hearer determines apart from the preacher’s designs or desires. However, care must be taken here as well that appropriation does not simply transfer the wagging finger from the pulpit to the hearer’s conscience. The superego can be a taskmaster bearing bad news. Appropriation is best understood as that set of confessional and ethical action that one (as an individual or as a

¹ Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum.
I. New Homiletic Preaching as a Sacramental Foreclosed Too Quickly

If with Wesley we maintain that the telos of Christian proclamation is sanctification, then we should consider how preaching is efficacious in ways that are similar to other sacramentals. Richard Schechner, a pioneer of performance theory in North American theatre and religion, identifies *efficacy* at one end of a spectrum that includes *entertainment* at the other end; Schechner claims that all performances, while usually dominated by one end or the other, offer a blend of these two elements. We posit that the New Homiletic has in some ways affirmed the efficacious, sacramental qualities of preaching; however, this affirmation rests primarily on the linguistic level through emphases on poetics, narrative and storytelling which tend toward the entertainment end of performance. By entertainment we

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2 Paul Scott Wilson addresses something like this in his discussion of the “mission” of the sermon. (Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 56–57.) An application can actually be antithetical to the gospel where it casts us back upon our own will and effort. On the other hand, the mission of the sermon can be very good news when people are empowered by the Holy Spirit to act. In his Four Page model, the first sense of mission is best heard as trouble and held to the first half of the sermon. The second sense of mission, action empowered by the Holy Spirit, is welcome at the end of the sermon.


4 By “New Homiletic” we mean that mid-twentieth century movement away from the preaching styles which were dominant from the late medieval period through the 19th century which deduced various “points” or propositions, often doctrinal, from any biblical text, no matter the genre. These points could then be applied to the listener through various forms of moral exhortation. In the 1960’s and 70’s several homileticians responded to the linguistic philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger (and their foremost theological interpreters, Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs) by shaping approaches to preaching that considered how hearers make meaning as they listen. New Homileticians advocated sermons that created experiences of the gospel often through the use of narrative and other poetic devices. Often New Homiletic sermons pay great attention to the literary forms of the biblical text as a prime influence on the form of the sermon. In general, the New Homiletic’s inductive approaches often demur from a clear sense of application, choosing instead to allow the hearer broad discretion to make of the experience what they will.
do not mean something trite or lacking depth or meaning. No homiletician would encourage that! Rather, our concern is that proponents of the New Homiletic are perhaps too enamoured with the sermon’s impact as an art form whose primary effect resides in the individual conscience. Of course, one of the defining characteristics of the New Homiletic was the preaching of sermons that did more than distill points from the text or prescribe appropriate ethical responses to the biblical text; sermons could engage the whole person by connecting with the narrative quality of human experience in the individual imagination.

Fred Craddock in *As One without Authority* defines an inductive approach that uses concrete imagery to evoke an experience of the gospel. The inductive sermon is open-ended and listener-completed: “A work of art does not exist totally of itself but is completed by the viewer.” Craddock responds to several criticisms of induction and among them is the concern that the inconclusive nature of such sermons gives too much permission to the listener and does not therefore effect change. Craddock responds that, by giving the listener permission to decide, induction creates the conditions for mature faith as a personal assent to the gospel. All notions of the “application” of general truths to the hearers’ lives as a part of the sermon are dropped. As Wesley Allen puts it, Craddock calls on us to trust the hearer: “You show them their lives in light of the gospel and they will do something with it.”

Then again, maybe they won’t. Maybe they will be satisfied with the psychological experience of the sermon and never appropriate the Word into any action of confession.

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6 Ibid., 3rd ed.:72.
7 Ibid., 3rd ed.:73.
8 The Renewed Homiletic, 13. See also John S. McClure, “Application,” in *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics*, vol. 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 3. where McClure states that “forms of application are considered by inductive homileticians to be too directive and denotative, removing the listeners freedom and stifling participation in the preaching process.”
testimony, or ethics. Our issue is not with induction as a homiletical method. Our issue rests in how the listener completes the sermon. Is it sufficient for the hearers to stop at the limits of their own imagination or thought? Our definition of success in preaching is that the hearers appropriate their imaginative encounter in some way. While we do not want to return to preaching that prescribes “appropriate” response, preaching can model and suggest itineraries for appropriation as well as providing room for congregational response that goes beyond what the preacher devises.

Craddock’s approach is careful to avoid prescription; still, like many New Homileticians, he considers the sermon in isolation from the worship service within which most preaching takes place. But it is the worship service which gives rise to the sermon and provides the first opportunity to embody the very gospel that has been proclaimed. Worship is the imaginative place to play around with the gospel, to try on various confessions. When we have prayed the Eucharistic prayer or asked God’s blessing on the water for baptism, we invite people to respond, and we have a pretty good idea about how we expect people to respond. We bear no guilty feelings about providing clear guidance for the people’s participation. So, why must we be so skittish about inviting participation either as part of or

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9 In *The Renewed Homiletic*, Wesley Allen names the following as the “pillars” of the New Homiletic: Charles Rice, Fred Craddock, Henry Mitchell, Eugene Lowry, and David Buttrick. Among these Rice, Mitchell, and Buttrick offer some specific help toward a sacramental notion of preaching such as I am describing in this exam, and the reader will note their contributions in the themes below. However Craddock and Lowry offer little assistance toward sermons that invite embodied participation. Craddock, Lowry, and Buttrick tend to treat the sermon as a separable jewel mounted in the setting of worship. Lowry’s plot-oriented approach does include some reflection on congregational response. In particular his insistence that human response be divinely empowered by the experiencing of the gospel certainly resonates with our thinking. However, the only guidance he offers in calling the congregation to commitment is an admonition not to be a “push-type” pastor who increases pressure on the hearer to perform. Rather, the preacher should set the hearer free by reducing such pressure. See Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Expanded ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 80–87. In our thinking, other invitations may be extended.
in response to preaching? It is as if we are satisfied with a meaningful, psychological experience of *justification* without the need for a full-body experience of *sanctification*. The New Homiletic preoccupation with preaching as a narrative art form must be extended. The church is not a museum for viewing art nor is it a theatre for experiencing drama. Preachers may curate the biblical text by exposing its features and pointing out its perspectives rendered by God’s Spirit long ago. But sacramental preaching will place the palette and brush in the congregants’ hands and usher them to a canvas to paint their own confession in a God who is acting today. To consider preaching as a sacramental is to accept the wisdom of the New Homiletic and use language to spark imaginative reflection. But we must invite more. We must invite action in response to God’s action toward us. Stephen Farris puts it well in requesting that sermons do more than “increase understanding:”

> With respect to preaching, understanding is...a means to an end or the by-product of an end, not the end itself. Trust, obedience, love, salvation, these are various ways of speaking of the complex reality that is actually preaching’s end.\(^{11}\)

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**II. Signs of Appropriation in Contemporary Homiletics**

Two conceptual branches which grow out of the origins of the New Homiletic and take divine/human action in preaching seriously are those devoted to performance and to testimony. These two branches come more close to my own thoughts on sacramentality in preaching than any other.

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\(^{10}\) African-american preaching has certainly never felt such a reticence.

A. Performance and Appropriation

The performance branch in recent homiletics is formed by scholars such as Charles Bartow, Richard Ward and Jana Childers. Childers, in particular, finds a link between preaching and theatrical performance in the narrative emphasis of the New Homiletic. The sermon is more than a flow of ideas:

The sermon is action. It is action that takes its direction from the flow of the life of the biblical text. It is action that moves the text’s imagery, threading biblical images together with the stuff of the listeners’ lives.\(^{12}\)

Childers also locates the sermon into Christian worship recognizing its unity with the liturgy around it and the congregation who participates. For her, the theatrical nature of preaching does not mean that preaching must be more aligned with entertainment than with efficacy. In fact, she connects preaching more with a theatrical sense of ritual than with “theatre” in any superficial sense. She encourages worship planners and preachers to imbue the whole worship service with a sense of plot and not just the sermon.\(^{13}\)

Performance in this sense has links to appropriation in the confessional sense. The gospel comes through (“per”) the preacher’s “form” as a confession of the gospel. Indeed, the sermon IS action...the preacher’s action! While appropriation as we understand it certainly should include the preacher’s embodied confession, we view appropriation as calling for the gospel to be expressed through the hearers’ bodies, in worship and out, as well.


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 124–133.
B. Testimony and Appropriation

Another burgeoning area of homiletical wisdom is the group of scholars concerned with testimony as a metaphor for Christian preaching. Grounded in the work of Paul Ricoeur\(^\text{14}\) and Walter Brueggemann\(^\text{15}\), both Thomas Long and Anna Carter Florence employ “witness” and “testimony” as key homiletical concepts.\(^\text{16}\) Carter Florence, in particular, notes the action basis of the sermon as testimony. We as preachers witness God’s action in the text as a lens through which to witness God’s action in our own life experience. The sermon is our act of public confession, of bringing to voice our conviction that we have experienced God at work. The power of such preaching is not so absolute as to force or demand faith; rather it offers, by persuasion and identification with the hearer, an invitation and a compelling plea to believe:

Because testimony is something we choose rather than something forced upon us, we are free to decide whether or not we wish to abide by a hermeneutic of testimony....We can choose to live by certitude or by faith. We can choose to own truth or incarnate it....Jesus himself chose not to wield absolute power. Jesus himself claimed the freedom of speaking the truth he saw and lived....He embodied for us the essence of proclamation and the essence of Christian faith—which is to speak the truth we have seen and experienced in our own way, no matter what comes.\(^\text{17}\)

Our thinking is consonant with Carter Florence and her use of testimony as a metaphor for preaching. The New Homiletic and its recent inheritors accomplish some vitally important things. The hearer’s experience of God’s action becomes the fulcrum on which the sermon turns and is engaged through both the biblical narratives and personal narratives to create faith in a God who acts. The New Homiletic is essentially a rhetorical toolkit for

\(^{14}\) In particular see “The Hermeneutics of Testimony” and “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation.”


discovering and performing one’s own testimony about God, and indeed this is appropriation as we understand it. But the New Homiletic is also very hands-off-ish when it comes to thinking about how the hearer might also bring to voice her own testimony. In a bid to reject the “sovereign” models of preaching from the “old” homiletic, the New Homiletic stops short of any suggestion about how the hearer might participate in the incarnation of the sermon as God’s Word. Speak the Word and “they’ll do something with it,” deduces the New Homiletic. Otherwise, the preacher might be exercising far too much autocratic control and moralizing prescription. But what about guidance? What about teaching? Can preachers not imaginatively invite or even suggest embodied response without being rigid in our expectations of “correct” responses? Most works on homiletics treat the sermon as a piece wholly separate from the acts of worship that accompany it. What follows is an assertion that it is essential to Christian preaching that the responsive practice of preachers and hearers alike must be of greater consideration to homiletical theory and sermon-craft.

III. Six Themes Toward a Homiletic of Appropriation

Sacramental theology is deeply concerned with efficacy, with action, and (as has been discussed in the theologies of the Reformers) with the Word of God. The sacramental aspect of performance in preaching is often negated by a false dichotomy of Word versus Sacrament; however, the sermon is a ritual act that invites active response. This section will unfold six themes in the New Homiletic and recent theology that pivot around the idea of the sermon as a sacramental event, an embodied act of preaching that calls out embodied action in the hearer. The themes are progressive, one building upon another. We will also discover

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how these themes take up the sacramental concerns of the Reformers and express them in contemporary context.

| Theme | A. Divine and human speech as “most important of the signs.”  
| GOD’S ACTION IN THE PAST AND PRESENT | B. The sermon is God’s ritual act no less than the sacrament.  
a. Christian rituals happen today  
b. Christian rituals happen through God’s action  
| C. God’s word is hidden in concrete symbols.  
Considerations of Ricoeur’s second order of reference – from the reproductive to the productive imagination.  
| APPROPRIATION | D. The sermon models embodiment of the gospel and invites collaboration.  
| PRESENT AND FUTURE HUMAN ACTION MADE POSSIBLE BY TEXT/SERMON | E. Word and sacrament as embodied resistance to and overturning of principalities.  
| | F. The authenticity of word and sacrament are measured in action.  

A. Theme One: Divine and Human Speech as Most Important of the Signs

Luther and Calvin’s reliance on Augustine’s formula (“Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum.”) may be extended by revealing how contemporary theologians view speech as a type of proto-sacrament, something which funds both appropriation in both preaching and sacramental forms. The logic of the Reformers’ belief in the primacy of the Word will be applied as a way of founding preaching and sacraments upon a single rock of grace. Luther’s concern that preaching and sacraments be present-tense experiences begins here and will continue through other themes.

This theme also reflects Ricoeur’s starting point in the realms of both narrative and of action. The biblical text is a series of discourses about divine speech and action which spark the imagination and fund the present and future with potential action. Similarly, when these texts are encountered in a public performance in worship and, specifically, in the events of both the sermon and the sacramental liturgies, divine speech might again be heard through
human voices, and divine action might again be seen in human appropriation. If it is God who does the baptizing, then is it not God who does at least some of the speaking? The future, on both a social level and an individual level, changes as a result of this encounter. Why? Because the liturgy (which rarely changes) and the biblical text (which does not either) are encountered in time and present experience. They give us new possibilities, but not until they are spoken, enacted, performed, and encountered.

Many contemporary homileticians and theologians have bemoaned that “instead of a duet there has been a kind of duel” between preaching and the sacraments, especially in the years immediately leading to and succeeding from Vatican II. William Skudlarek, a Catholic scholar, remembers the days of the early 20th century when “it was not uncommon for the priest to remove his chasuble before proceeding to the pulpit for the Sunday sermon, thereby giving quite clear visible expression to the understanding that the sermon was an interruption of the mass.” Our position is that, based on the liturgical theology of the Reformers as well as contemporary homiletical theology, an essential unity exists between preaching and sacraments. This position is held by Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox theologians alike. The basis of that unity is speech-that-interprets. Divine speech is the basis for the both the sacramental and the homiletical impulses. As such divine speech is

19 Thomas H Keir, The Word in Worship: Preaching and Its Setting in Common Worship. (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 35. Keir locates the chasm primarily in the preacher’s giftedness, doctrinal preference, and practice: “The cultic mind stresses the importance of the right formula, the prophetic one the importance of the right will. The one will incline to exalt the appropriate action regarded as effectual ex opere operato, the other will require, in response to proffered pardon, the inner contrition known to God alone. The peril that lies concealed for the ritualist is that the will may be exercised in the performance of the ritual movement without being brought to bear in the realm of real encounter which is expressed and sacramentally realized in the ritual movement. The kind of preacher who magnifies the prophetic office but has a weak sense of cult will sometimes be found to have a well-developed doctrine of individual salvation together with a deficient doctrine of the Church and the Kingdom.”

a sort of ur-sacrament which pours forth, albeit imperfectly, through the means of grace.

First, we will examine Roman Catholic scholars and then engage Protestants on the subject of divine speech as ur-sacrament.

Among Roman Catholics, Fr. Cypriano Vaggagini, a principal mover for the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council, offers this testimony in 1957 to the causal properties of speech in relation to all of the means of grace:

Speech is the most important of the signs employed by the liturgy, both in the elements originating with Christ and in those which come from the Church. In the essential parts of the Mass and the sacraments, speech is the "form" which determines the meaning of the "matter": it is the word of baptism which gives to the fact of being immersed in water and of coming out of the water the meaning of a participation in Christ's death and Resurrection….As early a writer as St. Augustine set down, a propos of baptism, a formula which has become famous: "Take away the words and what is the water but just water? Add the words to the element and you have a sacrament (accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum), which itself is like a visible word….Speech also takes first place among the signs in the liturgy instituted by the Church, Better than any other sign it incarnates and expresses the Church's reply to the divine work of sanctification. It incarnates and expresses the spiritual and interior worship of the Church, whether in prayer under all its forms or, more remotely, in preaching, which is a sign and an instrument used by the Church to prepare the faithful for receiving grace and participating in worship. Speech as sign also has a leading part to play in the sacramentals.….21

Language in the form of speech itself is the “most important of the signs” because speech plays a key role in indicating meaning. No speech, no sacrament; no speech, no preaching.

Speech is the external which reveals something that is hidden, both in the elements and also in the biblical text. In 1968, Ernest Skublics, another Catholic scholar, noted in an attempt to apply the sacramental principle to the proclaimed Word that the work is really done in reverse: “in reality it is the other way around: the sacraments work principally through the power of the word.”22 By this he meant that speech was the factor which signified meaning in the sacraments.


Mary T. Stimming’s dissertation comparing doctrines of Word and sacrament among both Protestants and Catholics reveals that the “fundamental shift” in the 16th century reformations was “to seeing the preached word as the primary means of grace.” This theory of preaching replaced a late Medieval, “essentially pedagogical theory of preaching” primarily concerned about religious and moral instruction with a *sacramental* theory of preaching concerned with “transformational efficacy.” Preaching is a special kind of speech like the sacraments are a special kind of action and what makes them both special is that they are efficacious; they *do* something and that something has to do with God. *Both* are actions of appropriation by the participants which invite even more participation and appropriation.

Mary Catherine Hilkert points to the origin of these actions in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, and how the Word continues to become flesh in the Body of Christ via appropriation:

> Jesus, the Word made flesh, became the primordial sacrament of God in the midst of human history. As the ongoing body of Christ in the world, the church participates in the abiding sacrament of Christ to the extent that the church embodies, speaks, and acts upon the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. Preaching and the sacraments, pre-eminently the eucharist, function as the church’s self-expression through naming, proclaiming, and celebrating the mystery of God’s salvific self-offering of love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.  

Just as God’s speech issued forth in primal material in Creation, and just as God’s reforming Word was spoken through the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 55:6-10), so also God’s redemptive purposes are spoken as Word through the birth, life, ministry, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and glorification of Christ. Not all human speech is revelatory, but in both

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preaching and sacraments, Hilkert states (after Karl Rahner) that ‘“the primordial words of human beings, transmuted by the Spirit of God are allowed to become words of God.’

Human words have the potential to become sacraments of divine love’ when they are spoken “from the center of ourselves” and “allow a deeper dimension of reality to emerge.” Rahner calls these “depth words,” primordial words that in a “public, conscious, and historical way” become sacraments.

Protestants, too, identify the primordial Word as an ur-sacrament. David Buttrick notes that in-church preaching, because it “brings us Christ, the Living Word” should properly be located within the liturgy. However, Buttrick’s hackles rise when preaching is only considered as one small part or component of a larger liturgy:

If preaching is merely a liturgical component, and liturgy in turn is merely an expression of the church’s faith, then--guess what?--preaching is suddenly demoted; it is no longer God's two-edged sword. ‘Liturgy’ means a public work of the people; but is preaching something we people both originate and perform? There remains a peculiar, probably unresolvable, tension between preaching and worship that we must acknowledge. According to the Reformers, the word of God through preaching is always extra nos, a word from God that we ourselves do not and indeed cannot possess....Preaching is larger than liturgy because it happens beyond liturgy as well as within liturgy; indeed, preaching is the kerygma that has called forth liturgy. Lately there is a tendency to subsume preaching under the heading "liturgy," and in turn to regard liturgy as an expression of the church's faith. In such a scheme, preaching is congregational self-expression that clergy, with democratic concern, can articulate. But preaching is not simply a word that emerges from the faith of a people, or that is received from a flow of tradition; presumably preaching is in some sense "God's voice."
Buttrick’s defense of preaching is understood. He is attempting to avoid the diminution of preaching’s singular power. But he could just as well be delivering a diatribe about poorly-executed liturgy that is not efficacious as divine speech and action. The sacraments are no more the property of the parish than the sermon and can also deliver the Word of God extra nos. The sermon and the sacraments both risk death if they are automatized and are not brought close to the felt needs of real people in a real culture. However, divine speech into those realities is always a potential as the Spirit gives guidance to preacher and church. In truth, Buttrick’s fears are applicable to the whole of worship.

Paul Scott Wilson, in speaking of the differences between preaching and sacraments, actually indicates several similarities of content and function:

Key differences between word and sacrament have to do not with content, for each is a means of grace, but with the form of each and the manner of God's action in each to accomplish God's saving purposes. The words of the sermon function in a manner similar to the words surrounding the action or the sacrament: The sermon expounds the word even as the prayer explains the sacrament. The prayer identifies the promises contained in the sacrament and creates as it were, an intentional surplus rather than an economy of meaning. The sermon moves from a particular place or places in the broad biblical story to the concreteness of our hope in Christ. The prayers by common tradition move similarly from God's saving actions in history to the concreteness of Christ's self-giving at this table in this bread and wine.... Even as the sermon articulates a specific Word for this congregation today, the sacramental prayers articulate the specific nature of the faith of the church at large.29

The sermon explains God’s action in the text; the prayers explain God's action in the sacrament; both sermon and prayers identify God’s promise in the text and in the act. Both connect God’s past action with God’s present action. The reason for the similarity is that God’s speech-that-acts, God’s Word that creates, reforms and redeems took shape as one whole human being, Jesus Christ. No other single person could again appropriate the speech-cum-deed. So the gifts of speech and act, one in Jesus, now are shed abroad in the church and world. But their origin is the singular grace of God. What then, given all of this evidence of

similarity, are the key differences between preaching and sacrament? We shall take this up in the third theme.

**B. Theme Two: The Sermon Is God’s Ritual Act No Less Than the Sacrament.**

How, then, does the hidden (encoded, camouflaged) Spirit become available (get revealed, discovered) out of the “dead” letter (symbols, language, clichés) of the biblical text? When do the root biblical symbols get brought into proximity with the felt needs of human life? This happens primarily in Christian worship through appropriation in the action of preaching. This theme like the previous one continues the Ricoeurian emphasis on encounter with a narrative that comes extra nos. What preaching claims is that the primary actor in preaching, just as in the sacraments, is God.

Some theologians have noted a similar sort of dance between preaching and the sacraments as liturgical theological partners. Reginald Fuller states that the role of the sermon in the liturgy is to “announce the action of God which is to occur in and through the whole eucharistic action.”

The sermon does indeed announce God’s action, but we think that preaching deserves a more fulsome definition than “announcement.” Karl Barth notes that preaching is liturgically located between baptism (as an originating event) and the Lord’s Supper (as a culminating event). The event of baptism is the “point of departure” which signifies belonging in a relationship with Christ and the church; the Lord’s Supper is the “sign of the same event but turned toward the future.”

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both the “origin and the aim” of preaching, the latter being “a commentary on and an interpretation of the sacrament, having the same meaning.”

Similar to Barth, David Buttrick see the relationship of sacraments and preaching as a cycle that is not captive to in-church liturgical worship. Buttrick sees the aim of “out-church” preaching as initiation in baptism; the aim of “in-church” preaching is identity-formation through Eucharist.

We understand that these perspectives are a tiny aspect of the total theological reflection on homiletics done by these men. However, these comments by Fuller, Barth, and Buttrick tend to place preaching in an “announcement” and “commentary” sort of role in relation to the sacrament, which is “not merely a word but an action, physically and visibly performed.”

Our claim is that preaching, when considered as a sacramental event, is also God’s act of speech in the church, appropriated by people in ways which are not “merely” preparatory to another action in the church. Not to say, however, that, as an action, preaching is more important than other sacramental acts; preaching is different in its use of the mercurial gift of language. But preaching is similar to other sacraments in that it is a ritual action. In baptism, the sacrament does not consist of certain prayers or rubrics; nor does it consist of water alone; even still, baptism is not simply made of words plus water; baptism is an act, God’s act, through the church and through a celebrant, words, water, congregants, and a recipient. Baptism is what happens when all of these things are enacted in an event, when God’s speech is appropriated. The same is true for preaching; preaching does not happen when the content of the sermon is devised, nor when the preacher rehearses her sermon in the

32 Ibid.
34 Barth, “Revelation, Sacrament, and Doctrine,” 343.
empty study beforehand; preaching requires a preacher, a biblical text, a sermon, and hearer; it is an action, a divine-human event in which Christ becomes present. H.S. Coffin locates Christ’s presence not in the content of preaching alone, but in the act of preaching as in the act of celebrating the sacraments:

... is it not more correct, more congruous with God's Self-revelation in the Scriptures, to speak of Him as present in the entire action of the Sacraments? Sacraments are corporate acts of the Church, Christ's Body. The physical symbols derive their contemporary power from the Church which celebrates them in Christ's name, and through which He Himself, alive and active, participates in their celebration.... [In the Lord’s Supper] He is personally with His followers and reveals himself (to employ a New Testament expression) in "the breaking of the bread." Note the verb of action—"in the breaking."  

So also Christ is present in the preaching. As at the table, Christ is both Host and Food, in preaching Christ is “both speaker and message,” actor and action. “[The homily] is not the simple announcement of the good news....” states Fr. Robert Lechner, “Nor is the homily a systematized and orderly presentation of doctrine for simple enlightenment or development of the word proclaimed.... The homily is a work of spiritual formation. In the homily moral becomes spirituality, liturgy becomes life, theology becomes mystery.”  

Interestingly, a temptation pervades liturgical experience to reify sacramental elements; these sacramental “things” (bread, wine, water) and their containers (chalices, fonts) often become synonymous with the sacrament themselves and are venerated, in Catholic and Protestant life alike. In a similar way, sermons are often reified as textual products of the pastoral week offered from ornate pulpits. But sacraments and sermons are not things; As Otto Semmelroth opines, the Church is not a place where someone can go to receive sacraments or sermon, a “warehouse” which is of interest “because of the objects

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36 Ibid., 1.

Church is a community of faith in which the incarnation of Jesus Christ is enacted for those gathered and realized in them by the Word. The act of preaching, like the sacraments, “makes present...the reality of that incarnational event which is literally ‘God’s own sermon’ to us. Preaching is God’s own sermon to us, today, appropriated by the preacher and that seeks appropriation in the lives of the hearer, immediately in the liturgy and then beyond. One remembers Gerhard Ebeling’s affirmation, taken up repeatedly in the New Homiletic, that the “sermon is EXECUTION of the text,” the rendering as present the action and address of God in the biblical text. We will explore these two facets of ritual action in two sections, one on the rendering as present and another on divine address.

i. **Christian Rituals Happen Today: Hodie!**

The sermon and the sacraments are surely about God’s action through Jesus Christ in the past, but only to stoke the expectation for the act of God in the present which, then, has distinct implications for the future. This, of course, was a key part of Luther’s thinking about both sermons and sacrament: the rendering of God’s speech as a present event. Ronald Starenko calls preaching, “an event, a living, pulsating action of God, as real today as it was

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38 Otto Semmelroth, *Church and Sacrament.* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, 1965), 82. Quoted in Janowiak, *The Holy Preaching,* 24. See also Nathan Mitchell, “Symbols Are Actions, Not Objects—New Directions for an Old Problem,” *Living Worship,* 13:2 (February 1977), 1: “Despite common opinion to the contrary, symbols are neither nostalgic remembrances of the past nor familiar reminders of things we already know. Symbols are not things people invent and interpret, but realities that ‘make’ and interpret a people. What we need today is not so much ‘better symbols,’ but a willingness to let ourselves be grasped and explored by them. For a symbol is not an object to be manipulated through mime and memory but an environment to be inhabited. Symbols are places to live, breathing spaces that help us discover what possibilities life offers.”


yesterday, as vital for contemporary man as it was for first-century man. Preaching is always an eschatological event, part of the on-going action of God through His Son...”\(^{41}\)

Jennifer Lord beautifully addresses the temporal mash-up that occurs in both preaching and sacraments through what she terms the “Hodie” sense of preaching. “Hodie” is the Latin word meaning “today,” and through it Lord emphasizes that preaching, while referring to past and future, breaks open an opportunity for God’s presence and action in the very moment of appropriation:

...the sacraments say something particular about the concept of time. Past, present, and future are layered on top of each other. This has been described as the *Hodie* of the liturgy—the *today* of the events. The Eucharist, for instance, is not the same thing as the last supper of Jesus with his disciples, a meal of the past. The Eucharist is our meal with the risen Christ. But the *Hodie* of the sacrament is such that in the re-presentation, the meaning of the past event includes our own present participation. Hence, although the Eucharist is in this moment and is with the risen Christ, it is also the way by which we say of the Last Supper (and the Exodus, and Emmaus Road) that, in fact, we, too, were there. What is key is that we do not have to wish we lived back then and walked with Jesus. We walk with Jesus now. We live with Jesus now. This *Hodie* quality points the other direction, too. It is the eschatological presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit now. The future tense has a claim on us now. What we hope for in the end times directs our life together now. We do not live only for that later time. Preaching, then, is free to be present tense in the *Hodie* sense. There is no need for us to wish for another age, past or future.\(^{42}\)

Certainly, in worship and in preaching, one does remember; one looks back to all that God has done in the past. Certainly, one does hope; one looks forward to the consummation of all things in glory. But we think that *memory and hope are not enough to sustain faith*. In fact, we claim that mere divine presence is not enough to sustain faith if that presence is not also active. To know that God is with us is a comfort; but if God is not acting, moving, saving in ways we can experience in the present, then the comfort is as cold as memories of the dead past and as confusing as our imagination of the future. The Reformation arguments about

\(^{41}\) Ronald M. Starenko, “Preaching and Liturgical Life.,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 40, no. 9 (October 1, 1969): 591.

\(^{42}\) Jennifer L. Lord, “Preaching to Inhabit the Sacraments,” *Insights* 125, no. 1 (September 1, 2009): 10. Lord takes this term, “hodie” from Oscar Chupungco who discusses the sermons of Leo I and how they emphasize the presence of Christ during the celebrations which often refer to past events such as Christmas and Easter. This may be found in *Handbook for Liturgical Studies* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1997), 56.
how Christ is really present in the sacraments are arcane to most contemporary Christians. Most long to know not how God is with us, but whether God is doing anything to save.

“Hodie!” says the sermon and “Hodie!” says the sacrament. Appropriation means that, today, God is binding memory and hope together around acts of divine self-giving known as sacrament. One of those acts is God’s self-giving through preaching.

ii. Christian Rituals Happen Through God’s Action

One mode of God’s self-giving is divine address. At the Eucharist, the consecrated elements are often distributed along with personal address, “This is the body of Christ given for you.” Not some theoretical “you” but “you who are receiving this bread.” Likewise, “The Blood of Christ for you” might accompany the giving of the cup. At the moment of baptism, the celebrant administers the water to the candidate saying something like, “Name, I baptize you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” or some other Trinitarian formula. As stated earlier, the celebrant speaks the “I,” but we claim that it is God who is baptizing here through the Body of the church. The recipients of both sacraments are directly addressed with something akin to Rahner’s “depth words.”

Preaching, too, is an event in which, at its most authentic, God speaks and addresses the listener(s) and is “able to bring us to the recognition that we are loved, that our lives are meaningful, that sources of strength are available to us in this fellowship of faith and love that go beyond anything we might have hoped for.”43 We are not caught up in some “theater of the absurd” in our lives;44 rather God in preaching is appropriating the preacher “to do

44 Ibid.
something to the people of God: to engender or to deepen faith, hope, love, repentance, obedience, worship (or, on occasion, anger or questioning).\textsuperscript{45}

John McClure has criticized this way of thinking about preaching as “shamanistic” which, in our view, appears to mean “primitive.” He claims that New Homiletic preaching is rooted in a “Mythic-Symbolic” epistemology that produces a “priestly and even shamanistic quality that tends to become individualistic and to remove itself from discourses of action and engagement.”\textsuperscript{46} In our view, such “discourses of action” are birthed precisely from God’s initiative through this symbolic quality. To remove the mythic/symbolic character of Christian worship is to disconnect ourselves from the one source of power which can actually change the direction of human action toward the ethical ends which are so important to McClure. To preserve the symbols (the language of the Bible, the sermon, the wine, the bread, the water, the church, etc.) is to wait upon God and God’s Word to renew our strength, to inspire our active, embodied response beyond our thoughtful considerations.

In a helpful article, Andrew Weyermann cautions preachers about their use of divine address and about not being clear for whom they are speaking, themselves or God: “The result is that they falsely bind the consciences of the hearers with much of what they say. Every sermon contains personal moral and theological opinions neither commanded by God nor shared by everyone in the church. The preacher must be fully aware when he speaks for himself and is not speaking by divine command or for the church.”\textsuperscript{47} Still, Weyermann


\textsuperscript{46} See McClure, \textit{Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics}, 78. We wonder whether, without the mode of encounter/event, an experience of God’s action and engagement can be considered authentic responses to God’s initiative.

cautions against never presuming to risk speaking for God and placing the sermon under the sign, “It seems to me...:”

The sermon becomes a personal rumination of the faith offered to the hearer to accept or reject as seems right for him or her. In short, the preacher, out of a fear of being called intolerant or dogmatic, never speaks for God or for the people of God. It is awesome to speak for God. That is why the preacher is so centered in the gospel, for there we behold God's grace and truth. When the truth is told and the gospel is preached, the preacher speaks for God.48

Perhaps no one has been as consistent in speaking of preaching as God’s act as Gerhard Forde and Paul Scott Wilson. Forde, a Lutheran systematic theologian, wants preaching to be less an explanation of the text and more a “doing of the text to the hearers, a doing of what the text authorizes the preacher to do in the living present.”49 Preaching, at its proclamatory best, is “more like a sacrament than other oral communication such as teaching or informing.” In administering the sacraments, he says, “We do not merely say something, we do not merely impart information, we do something, we wash in water, we give bread and wine, to those who come....We give it, flat out.”50 Forde might seem to be emphasizing the preacher’s work in the preaching, but he identifies the preacher’s authority as derivative from God in Christ, just as the other sacraments derive from dominical authority. Forde’s complaint is that too often the sacraments (preaching included) function as something that we are doing to manipulate God into presence or action. Rather, in appropriation, the sacraments and proclamation are means whereby God does something to change us, and we discover that this something is now part of us. The Word of God comes from outside us, extra nos; our

48 Ibid.
49 Gerhard O. Forde, Theology Is for Proclamation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 155.
50 Ibid., 148.
preaching needs to speak with confidence about what God has done and is now, in the
moment of preaching, doing and “not chicken out on it, but just drive it home.”\textsuperscript{51}

Interestingly, Forde reminds us that God’s alien Word does not only come to us in the
form of grace or gospel, but God also speaks through the law. To be sacramental, preaching
must do both because the sacraments also display this double character of law/grace and
death/life:

> The claim that the letter kills but the Spirit gives life is an assertion in unmistakable terms about what
> words can actually do. They can kill and make alive, they put to death the old and call the new to life
> in Christ. The art of distinguishing between law and gospel is simply the attempt to reclaim in the
> living present this active, sacramental functioning of the words for the preaching of the church.\textsuperscript{52}

After all, the water-symbol of baptism means both death by drowning \textit{and} life in new birth.
The bread and wine of the Eucharist are both life-giving sustenance \textit{and} Christ’s costly flesh
and blood. So also preaching “involves wielding the text so as to do what is supposed to be
done if the letter, or law, \textit{kills} and the Spirit gives life.”\textsuperscript{53}

Paul Scott Wilson’s homiletics form the apex in the New Homiletic of the application
of the law/gospel approach to the practice of preaching of which Forde is one representative
but that stems from the Reformers themselves. For Wilson, preaching at its best should be
both \textit{about} God (teaching) and also should \textit{do} something \textit{for} God (proclamation).\textsuperscript{54} Sermons
guided by the Holy Spirit can talk about the text and about God’s presence and life; but
sermons should also \textit{offer} God’s presence and life, “not as ideas but as a relationship with the
one who overturns powers and principalities of this world. Salvation is given, and justice,

\textsuperscript{51} Gerhard O. Forde, \textit{The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament}, Lutheran Quarterly

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 91.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{54} Paul Scott Wilson, \textit{Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon} (Nashville:
Abingdon Press, 2008) The entire work helps preachers do their best job at both teaching and proclaiming.
mercy, and righteousness become possible.”

Teaching is vitally important to Wilson: “Having information about someone is valuable.” Nevertheless, information “is no substitute for actually meeting the person and hearing that person speak....Like a sacrament, [proclamation] offers God to the people.”

At baptisms, we can speak all of the words of explanation we would like; we can pray all the prayers; those are necessary for us to interpret what the church means in the act that follows; but nothing can substitute for the application of water to person, nor for those performative words spoken on God’s behalf, “I baptize you....” Wilson also highlights the celebration in African-American preaching as of sacramental character. This sermon sub-form is even “sometimes spoken in the character of God.” Wilson connects this celebration in the black church with the apostolic tradition of thanksgiving (eucharistia) and its forms that we find in the Lord’s Supper such as anamnesis and epiclesis, where there is often pastoral singing and dialogue back and forth with the congregants. While Wilson does not attempt to establish a direct connection between the two, he notes that the similarities may indicate that “celebration has at least muted expression in nearly every church.” For our purposes, the celebration is one more example of the sermon as an act of appropriation, a sacramental event, and a means of grace through corporate worship.

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55 Ibid., 247.
56 Ibid., xi.
58 Wilson, Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon, 211.
59 Ibid., 210.
Much of Wilson’s work centres upon the crucial pastoral choice to keep God as the focus of the sermon. Our human concerns are vital, but what makes sermons sacramental is that they feature God’s action through the gospel in the text and in the sermon *toward* human concerns. The sermon is God’s ritual act of speech today, fulfilled in our hearing.60

**C. Theme Three: God’s Word Is Hidden in Concrete Symbols**

This theme takes up Luther’s theology (after the Apostle Paul) of the letter and spirit of the biblical text. That the Word of God is not confined to the biblical past is a function of language with which twentieth-century philosophy and theology has been deeply concerned. If the first two themes stress the union between preaching and sacraments as appropriations of divine speech in the present tense, our third theme will more clearly define the key aspect of that unity. Also, we will examine how preaching and sacraments differ in their use of that key aspect.

The homiletical and theological literature reveals that preaching and sacrament share, at base, a symbolic/metaphoric impulse. Both Word and sacrament disclose meaning via symbols. A concrete, sensible item becomes a pointer beyond itself to something else, some other concept or idea. As we discussed in chapter three, in classical definitions of a sacrament the concrete symbol usually bears some resemblance to the idea which is signified. Language, too, uses symbols of sound (words) to point to some other object or idea. Yet words themselves cannot bear resemblance to their signifieds; they are just phonemes that we systemize into a linguistic structure. Still, words *are* sensate and, in discourse, stand in for

60 Stephen Farris, too, begins his book on analogy in preaching by clearly claiming that God speaks to us through the Bible and through preaching. Analogy is the key to adjusting our ears to hearing God’s voice. See Farris, *Preaching That Matters*, 1–7.
and evoke certain images, objects, and ideas. The metaphor is a linguistic extension of the symbolic impulse in which two ideas are united into a single innovation. For instance, the metaphor “she has a heart of gold” reveals both a resemblance and a dissimilarity. No one’s heart is literally made of gold. But to have a heart of gold is commonly used to describe someone with pure intentions who acts with sincere kindness. Their action feels emotionally authentic and truly valuable. In this way the metaphor becomes a sort of concrete symbol which bears resemblance to its hidden signified. This interplay between the revealed and the hidden in Word and sacrament is important to the consideration of preaching as a sacramental event.

This theme connects with Ricoeur’s general hermeneutics at the point of suspension. The schema of the narrative which has been encountered in the reading of scripture and in the preaching of the sermon now submit a request for work to the imagination on both individual and social levels. The normal course of our narrated lives is suspended while we consider the impact that these new narratives have on that course. On the individual level, the symbolic world mediated to the hearer by the scripture and sermon are metaphorized in the imagination as the mind holds the horizons of the symbolic world and our contemporary world near to one another. On the social level, in worship, preachers do the same thing: hold these worlds close together. The symbols form and reform our identity. Though we may experience God in those narratives as one of many characters in a tale, God’s Word still speaks as if present to us. In this moment of suspension, new options for the present and future open to us in light of the God who speaks and may be appropriated in our minds and bodies. Our existence is reframed and not without our cooperation. We can find ourselves
and our community of faith transformed. In some hidden cataract of our lives we find that Word, which once was alien to us, is now part of us.

H. Grady Davis thinks of preaching as that kerygma which expressed the interior, transformed reality of Christians’ lives:

The early Christians knew themselves to be living—jointly with one another and with Christ, in God—as a completely changed and reconstituted humanity, in an existence on an entirely new basis, in a new age which was at the same time a fulfillment of God’s ancient purpose and promise. It was not that Christians simply thought of themselves as morally reformed; it was that they were newly created persons in a newly created world.\(^{61}\)

That quality of interior thought about God’s acts of re-creation took on forms of expression in both preaching and in the sacraments. One sacrament was baptism, “the cleansing of new generation, new begetting, new parentage, death and resurrection with Christ.”\(^{62}\) The water symbolized that new life. Another concrete expression of that interior renewal was the Eucharist: “In the communion, they partook of Christ’s life and immortality.”\(^{63}\) Davis argues that these expressions were not just symbols of God’s work, nor were they magic tricks to make God act: “They were the visible manifestations of the new existence.”\(^{64}\) Preaching, too, in its truest form is not simply teaching moral lessons or explaining texts. For Davis, the best preaching is sacramental in that it both appropriates (in preaching) and brings to appropriation (in the hearer) this same radical renewal seen in the sacraments.

Thomas Keir calls the image (whether sensible with the eye or evoked through language) the “language of faith.” Thus, biblical imagery which evokes a concrete world forms the basis of liturgical experience:

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\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 124.

\(^{64}\) Ibid.
The type, the parable, the metaphor, pictures of the Good Shepherd, the Sovereign God, the descending dove, the cloud, the tongues of fire, the smoke in the Temple, the Light, the Living Water, and that strange wayfaring Figure, no longer shaped or coloured or clad according to the previously known categories of recognition, of whom the Gospels record that he appeared to the disciples ‘in another form’ and ‘they knew not that it was Jesus’ all this and much more like it is, as we all know, wholly characteristic of the Bible’s way of speaking of the ‘mystery’, the opened secret of the Gospel. Not surprisingly it is also the characteristic language of the liturgies.65

Keir then proceeds to connect this liturgical language that we hear and witness in sacramental acts back to the act of preaching:

The language of faith, then, is the image. This fact is of first-class importance for the preacher, both as to his interpretations of the Bible and his preaching technique. When he speaks of God and tries to describe God’s ways of dealing with men, he speaks in images, analogies, parables, metaphors, paradigms, both Biblical and extra-Biblical.66

He closes memorably: “Metaphor is in fact the sacrament of the imagination.” Keir means by this that, via metaphor, language has the ability to render as sensate ideas which are not. To hold the loaf, bless it, break it and give it is a clear and visible ritual sign. But to speak of bread in descriptive terms, to name it Christ’s flesh, also evokes in the human imagination something of the bread’s tangibility.

Patricia Wilson-Kastner, too, describes the sermon as giving “form, shape, and image” to intangible grace in ways very similar to Eucharist. She also connects both preaching and the sacraments to the incarnation of Christ:

...[H]omiletic language that is concrete and image-centered is congruent with the specificity and incarnational character of all sacramental prayer. Preaching focuses its words in the concrete, the specific, and the ordinary, because the God we know through the Bible became flesh for us in Jesus Christ. God is known to us through light and darkness, mother hens and soaring eagles, and in the human face of Jesus. Good preaching is rooted in the senses, because God became known to us in the flesh.67

Charles Rice, too, calls for concrete homiletical language oriented to the senses, just as God’s greatest self-expression is in Jesus the Word: “In order for homiletical and liturgical

66 Ibid., 64–65.
language to be effective, it must be concrete. In sermons we look for concreteness; liturgy depends upon sacramental materiality and particularity; and our very faith centers on the confession of the Word become flesh."\(^{68}\) Additionally, Rice calls for language that is not only concrete but whose origin is within the community where the preaching occurs: “Even the content of the sermon, its language coming from this very community, is analogous to the sacraments. Like bread, wine and water, the words and idiom, stories and images of the very time and place become, in the sermon, the gifts of God for the people of God.”\(^{69}\) Just as people bring the bread, wine, and water for the sacraments, so also they bring their stories, their lives to be broken open by God so that the divine within them may be revealed and received in appropriation.

Interestingly, in both Word and sacrament the concrete visual symbol or audible utterance simultaneously *hides* the divine Word and deed beneath the human and *reveals* the divine Word and deed through the human. Or, as Paul Janowiak states, “The Church both ‘manifests’ and ‘camouflages’ the mystery it proclaims.”\(^{70}\) Paul Wilson notes this effect as well. Quoting Douglas John Hall, Wilson states, “Yet Protestant pneumatology affirms ‘that here, in this human and therefore entirely fallible act [of preaching], it may be that the eternal shall once more invade the temporal and human souls glimpse once more their true origin and destiny.’ Preaching in this more significant sense is God’s act, not a human act.”\(^{71}\)

Human language is used in preaching, and that language reveals God’s speech.


\(^{69}\) Ibid., 54.


\(^{71}\) Wilson, “Preaching and the Sacrament of Holy Communion,” 57.
But words do not work *ex opere operato*; the human words in both the preaching and the prayers of sacraments also obscure divine communication and are ultimately no match to the task: “The inadequacy of our own words to express the mystery that we proclaim in Christ is most clearly compensated in the visual re-enactment of our faith to which Christ joins himself. This action depends on words while at the same time it exhausts all words, its meaning and significance never being fully represented or enclosed by those words.”

Preaching and sacraments, therefore, seek to mediate a single divine grace, an offer of loving relationship to the Christian. But each alone is inadequate to make the offer. Together, the strengths of one meet the weaknesses of the other. Together a more fulsome sense of grace is offered to the Christian.

The key difference between preaching and other sacramental means of grace may be found in their unique strengths. The power of the sacraments rests in the durability they have because their symbols are ultimately bound to the material order. However, because the sacraments are bound to the material they do not respond well to the changing circumstances of time; cup, bread, water, cross, Christ, etc. all seem eternal, primordial, and originary. The power of preaching rests in the mercurial nature of language to bring these primordial symbols close to the felt needs of our contemporaries. While the sacraments exhibit a mostly “binding” quality, preaching exhibits a “bursting” quality related to language’s ability to produce apt, and yet ephemeral connections to the symbolic worlds of the biblical text. When that powerful connection happens in preaching and in the sacraments, when the ancient symbols of the text are brought close to one’s own life and lips, an innovative spark can

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Ibid., 58.
traverse time from then to now and bursts open new horizons for meaning and appropriation.  

When this spark happens, the barriers between the abstract and the concrete begin to relax within the individual imagination and also in the ecclesial imagination known as worship; The evocative ancient symbols in the text arrive by being appropriated in both preaching and sacraments, as if new and nourishing, as Gordon Lathrop experiences in preaching:

I hope my words may be eaten and drunk. How is that? What makes that possible? I suppose one might say that concrete images in the preaching make it possible for the hungry imagination of the hearers to devour the words.... But what I really mean is this: Here are these words I have prepared. I now beg God to make use of them like the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Pouring out the Spirit on them so that on, in, and under them—as in preaching made sacramental—the hearers will encounter Jesus Christ and find that what he has to give in the cross makes them alive.

Lathrop makes a crucial comparison. The use of concrete images in our verbiage by itself does not constitute sacramentality in preaching. Using concrete images can definitely stoke the imagination and hold the interest of the listener, but the preaching may still not connect with the symbolic and metaphoric world of the biblical text in such a way that the deep symbols of the faith become alive again in contemporary experience; the giving of Christ through the cross is as dead as any cliché unless the symbols of Christ and cross are brought close enough to contemporary life that fresh metaphor can burst forth.

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73 Some homileticians have recently advocated that preachers should look to the verbs/action of the biblical text as a hermeneutical bridge from then to now. Anna Carter Florence in her recent Beecher Lectures at Yale calls for a “verbs first” reading of the text. Biblical nouns tend to refer to anachronistic ideas that bear little resemblance to modern life: When have we seen kings or shepherds? Most of us no longer plant seeds or harvest grain. But human actions continue to be recognizable across time. While we agree with Carter Florence that this can be a helpful way to approach the text, we are convinced that the most durable symbols of the biblical text reside in the nouns: cross, blood, Christ, God, etc. The nouns may contain the most difficult concepts to translate into modern life, but they are what render the text specifically Christian. We hold with Paul Ricoeur that metaphors function on the level of the sentence where nouns and verbs together project possible worlds into our future. See Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language, (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

As Paul Janowiak offers in his study of the connections between homiletics and the New Historicism, a “social energy” encoded in the biblical texts gets released in their reading and their public performance in the church (i.e., when they are appropriated). That energy in the text, encoded (“hidden” or “camouflaged”) in the deep symbols and metaphors of Christian faith, once revealed and released via the symbolic/metaphoric impulse is made available once again to be incarnated in the Body of Christ through appropriation and human action. People bring to their own voices the experience of what those symbols mean in their individual lives and in their ecclesial life. People act out with their bodies, both in worship and in the world, what it means to believe these things.

We are now in view of the ascent of God’s word through the sermon, now rendered contemporary, into human practice via appropriation. In the next three themes, we will view three aspects of homiletical appropriation: 1) preaching as a collaborative effort; 2) preaching as an embodied practice of social resistance; and 3) preaching as authenticated by living practice, by appropriation.

D. Theme Four: The Sermon Models Embodiment of the Gospel and Invites Collaboration

The sermon is an event of sacramental performance in that the Word of God becomes incarnate in the preaching, not only in the preacher but in the hearer. In the sermon, the preacher has come to believe something about God to the point of confession; the preacher has seen God’s action in the biblical text, has perhaps named that same God into her own life
and experience, and now, in the preaching, she will “come out” as Christian. She will appropriate in her voice and body a gospel Word that, mere moments before, was hidden and obscure. She will become a “text” in her own right that the congregation will “read,” a witness that they will hear. However, she has had her congregation in mind all week. She has read the news; she has presided at the funeral; she has attended the bedside; she has sipped coffee with the doubtful. All week, she has held these lives as well as her own up close to the God-who-acts, seen through the symbols and deep metaphors of the Scriptures; a spark has erupted and connected them all: text, gospel, God, preacher, listener and world. The sermon will not belong to the preacher any more than the Eucharist belongs to the celebrant; the sermon belongs to the Church as Christ’s own body. The gathered community have been the contemporary basis for the sermon and will be its recipients.

Heaven knows, the congregation will not appropriate the sermon passively or uncritically. The horizons of the biblical text, of the sermon, and of the hearers will draw close to one another so that their own meaningful sparks can invite them to the possibility of faith in a God who affects their own orbits of life. When the people come to worship, they come to offer what they have, that which, without worship, is inert and empty of significance: bread, wine, water, money. They also offer to God their own narratives and the biblical text itself, which, again, without worship, is an over-automatized, clichéd, dead text. When they leave worship, all of these will have been placed into God’s care, broken open, and given back to them as life-giving, renewed, vital means of sustenance. The point here, though, is that the whole community co-labours in this process. Sacraments are cyclical and not linear in nature. The people bring their gifts, the ordained and lay ministers take, bless,

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break, and give them back; the people appropriate them and return to their lives sustained and energized to live out their faith in the God who is constantly refreshing that faith. Both sermon and sacrament function in this collaborative way.\footnote{Of course, this is an ideal sort of description. Often the sermon returns the text and the stories of the congregation right back to them just as dead as when they were brought; sometimes the Eucharistic ritual is as rote, automatized, and meaningless as a phone book recitation. But at its best, worship functions as a renewal of the human imagination via the overlay of the divine imagination.}

Perhaps nowhere is this more palpable than in the sacramentality of black worship and preaching. In the previous theme, Wilson noted the connections between the celebration which carries many African-American sermons to their conclusion and several characteristics of the traditional Eucharist. The event of black preaching is often an entirely collaborative event; the preacher speaks and the congregation responds, audibly, with exhortation and prayer:

> Preaching in the African American tradition took the biblical stories once told, told them again, and made them the testimonies of the preachers and the people in the context of their everyday existence and experience. These stories lost their objective nature and gave way to the subjective belief and experience of preachers and hearers. The preacher would often shift from ‘he said,’ ‘she said,’ and ‘it happened’ to ‘I heard,’ ‘I feel,’ ‘I believe,’ and ‘I know.’ The people would then respond audible or inaudibly, ‘That’s right,’ ‘That’s the way it happened with me,’ or ‘I know you’re right.’\footnote{Olin P. Moyd, \textit{The Sacred Art: Preaching & Theology in the African American Tradition} (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), 112.}

As well, the sacraments are not a passive affair. Even in baptism, a single candidate receives the water, but the water has been brought by the community of faith who makes vows to uphold the baptized in Christian life and faith. The Eucharist, too, involves a participation by direct reception of the consecrated food into the body.

Adding to Wilson’s parallel between the African-American celebration and Eucharist, just as one can see shift in tense in the celebration from the past-tense “it happened” to the present-tense “I feel” and “I believe,” one can hear the same shift in the Eucharist as the past-tense of the memorial acclamation (“Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come...”)}
again.”) gives way to the ostensive in the epiclesis ("Pour out your Spirit on us gathered here and on these gifts...Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ that we may be the body of Christ redeemed by his blood."). This is appropriation in the sacraments, when what Christ instituted thousands of years ago becomes our own as we receive it from God.

For Luther as well as Calvin, the Wort of God calls forth the Antwort, which is also God’s Word through the answer of all the people. Christ, the Word, is present in both, which is to say, as Henry Mitchell says, “people do what they celebrate.” When Ricoeur says that human capabilities imply the recognition of others, the homiletical cognate to this principle may be found here: The sermon may seem like an individual performance that does not demand recognition from others. But in practice, both sermon and sacrament imply this recognition. The Word of God in the bread and wine of Eucharist, as the prayer goes, are, through grace, answered by the Body of Christ made so by Christ’s blood. When the priest says, in reference to the elevated bread, from the words of institution, “This is my body,” she might just as well be referring to the whole gathered community, Christ’s own answer to Christ’s own Wort. When Wilson says the following of black preaching, could he not as easily be speaking of Eucharist:

> The Spirit accomplishes what the preacher’s words invite by their content, energy, and direction. Rejoicing on the part of the preacher is infectious. It is the beginning of the people joining in the same and enacting their ministries in the week. In the best expressions of celebration the people become the message...

That energy belongs to the community, states Paul Janowiak. A creative social energy is encoded into the biblical text, but “the manner in which a past work circulates this social

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78 United Methodist Church (United States), The United Methodist Book of Worship. (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Publ. House, 2009), 38 Emphasis added.

79 Mitchell, Celebration and Experience in Preaching, 62.

80 Wilson, Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon, 210 emphasis added.
No preacher should be idolized for their ability to interpret God’s Word; they were called, set aside, and shaped for ministry in their own historical community, the church, which profoundly affects, even calls forth, their “genius.” The interpretation does not belong to them alone; it also belongs to the Church and to the God who makes the Church by Christ’s blood. For Janowiak, the whole social transaction of preaching is so multifaceted that, when God’s Word is powerfully heard, no single facet can be privileged as its origin:

The Scriptures and the homily, in the end, are not in the hands of the preacher...alone; ...such power is not even primarily located within an individual. The proclamatory energy—what sacramentality calls the “dynamism of grace”—circulates throughout the shared tradition of the Church, the concrete lives of believers who have passed it on in faith, and the social context of a particular time and congregation that gathers to hear this proclamation in new and unforeseen ways.... Something is ‘passing back and forth,’...rather than emanating from a message contained within a static text or an authoritative speaker and then handed over to a passive congregation of listeners.

Hence, preaching, as with other sacraments, should not be viewed as a linear process of active proclamation and passive reception; rather, an “exchange” of spiritual “currency” can happen in worship when God’s Word is appropriated by both preacher and hearer, particularly in church cultures which encourage bodily response to preaching and sacraments. The grace conferred by the sacrament is not a static substance imputed to a passive recipient via a symbol; sacramental grace involves an energetic, spiritual exchange between participants mediated by the symbolic/metaphoric impulse in liturgy and preaching. This exchange is congruent with Wesley’s notions of responsible grace. To be sure, God moves first; however, God’s first move is always to free us enough to make the second move, to respond in hunger and thirst for help, faith and love. God grants forgiveness, regeneration,
and justification; and only by God’s help do people exchange these for repentance, obedience, and sanctification. They appropriate God’s Word.

E. Theme Five: Word and Sacrament as Embodied Resistance to and Overturning of Principalities

Preaching is not simply something interesting to think about for the week as if God were satisfied simply to evoke an individual psychological experience in us. If H. Grady Davis is correct that we are “newly created persons in a newly created world,” then preaching as a sacramental event is no less than God speaking that new creation into being through a community of praxis and embodied participation. However, the state of the world is such that the presence of a newly created people can only provoke the denizens of the old systems of human misery. The sacraments are concerned with how words perform actions in real time, not simply describing the past. Words can be a form of embodied practice and they can evoke embodied practice on both individual and social levels. Appropriation in preaching and sacraments seeks appropriation in the hearers and participants. As Wesley might say, preaching and sacraments are expressions of God’s grace which evoke a real change in the hearer, not just a relative change. Put differently, both preaching and sacraments describe God’s action in the past as transaction and mediate God’s action in the present as transformation.

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the fall of humanity broke the perfect unity of Word and deed as witnessed in God’s creative Genesis speech; preaching, for him, heals the brokenness between Word and deed.\(^{84}\) Preaching is an action which testifies to God’s past and present

action producing faith in individuals and the community which is the catalyst for God's Word to continue to act in the bodies of believers to shape a new community, the reign of God. Preaching and the sacraments are both practices which seek to subvert certain ideologies by shaping a new people through worship. This perspective is made most clear in the literature by two authors: Walter Brueggemann and Charles Campbell. We will review their perspectives briefly.

For Brueggemann, the prophetic tradition is evinced by preaching but also in the sacraments. To make Eucharist together is a prophetic act. Brueggemann states in his introduction to “The Prophetic Imagination: “What the prophetic tradition knows is that it could be different, and the difference can be enacted.” By “it” he means the state of things. Both preaching and sacrament are enactments of a New Community.

Brueggemann’s most pointed example of this enactment comes in his reflections on William Kavanaugh's book, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*. Kavanaugh outlines atrocities in Chile under Pinochet and how the Catholic church responded. His argument is that the torture was designed to prevent human community. Eucharist, thus, became an antidote to torture, through human imagination. Kavanaugh reflects on descriptions of Eucharist in the face of a machine of state torture and states that these descriptions “provide us with a glimpse of what it means to make the odd claim that the Eucharist is to live inside God's imagination. It is to be caught up into what is really real, the body of Christ. As human persons, body and soul, are incorporated into the performance of Christ's *corpus verum*, they resist the state's ability to define what is real through the

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mechanism of torture.” For Brueggemann, little remains to be said about imagination as theological force, except to note that clearly the need for Eucharistic imagination in North America is very different from the need for it in the abusive context that prevailed in Argentina and Chile: “It may be, however that torture and consumer satiation perform the same negative function: to deny a lively, communal imagination that resists a mindless humanity of despairing conformity....If Eucharist is potentially an act of resistance and alternative to torture, perhaps Eucharistic imagination can also be a potential resistance and alternative to commodity satiation…”

Charles Rice notes that, for Brueggemann, the Eucharist is “a prophetic act that combines the dismantling of the structures of power that defy God and oppress goodness with the energizing presence of the one for whose coming all things wait. The priest at the altar, no less than the preacher in the pulpit, is at work dismantling and energizing.” Both preaching and the sacraments can function as subversive, dismantling appropriations of God’s Word that seek to supplant destructive systems of imagination with God’s own imaginative community.

However, Brueggemann asserts an even more radical claim. Preaching and sacraments not only practice a certain resistance to principalities and powers; they are also practices that mediate God into human life. Brueggemann notes his own shift in perspective from a textual claim for God’s relationship with humanity to a practice-based claim:

It has been my wont to say that Yahweh’s ‘natural habitat’ is the text of the Old Testament, and there is no Yahweh outside this text. Now I intend to push behind that textual-rhetorical claim, to say that

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86 Ibid., xx.
87 Ibid.
Israel not only had an inscribed testimony about God; they also appropriated that testimony in symbolic, rhetorical and dramatic practices that not only described a relationship with Yahweh but also mediated that relationship. Lance Stone, in an article about this praxis emphasis of Brueggemann, reveals the transference of this effect into the scope of Christian life and practice: “Such mediations, practised in Israel’s life and articulated corporately, symbolically and dramatically in this way, had a sacramental force. Thus Brueggemann sums up his exposition of speech and mediating practice and gesture by making a link to Christian theology, in which speech and gesture are transposed into Word and sacrament.” So, for Brueggemann, preaching and sacraments are not merely the church’s practices of resistance to death-dealing cultural forces; they are practices of mutual experience between the divine and human dimensions of life; preaching and the sacraments are God’s practice of resistance, too. The Word of God becomes the Act of God through appropriation.

In a similar vein, Charles Campbell avers that “Many routine church practices are in fact practices of resistance to the power of death in the world.” But becoming routinised, these practices lose some of the obvious qualities of resistance. Campbell finds that preaching can help to restore a view of the sacraments as opposing dehumanizing ideologies and practices. One of those practices is worship. While Campbell does not the mention sacraments explicitly, one can find them in the context of worship that he addresses:

In the context of the principalities and powers, Christian worship is fundamentally an act of resistance. As I have noted, what the powers desire most from human beings is our worship; they claim to be the divine regents of the world and to offer us life if we will only serve them. In this context, it is not surprising that the fundamental practice of the redeemed community in the book of Revelation is

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worship. There is no more subversive act where the powers are concerned than praising the God of Jesus Christ, who has exposed and overcome them.91

In summary, both Word and sacrament reveal a prophetic edge capable of resisting, subverting and even overturning ideologies that run contrary to the reign of God. Those ideologies may press upon the Church from the broader culture surrounding it, or they may be ideologies which have co-opted the church’s imagination within its own boundaries. Regardless, the appropriation of God’s Word through worship, well-designed and led, not only can consolidate Christian identity, but can, in Word and deed, deconstruct identities sick with self-preservation.

F. Theme Six: The Authenticity of Word and Sacrament are Measured in Action

A paradox of significant proportions envelops both Word and sacrament; this paradox is related to the notion of the hidden and revealed Word of God that we examined in Theme 3. It is also related to the symbolic impulse evinced by the sacraments. The divine action of God, at once hidden in the text of the Bible, the text of the sermon, the material symbols of the sacrament, becomes authenticated in active human response in worship and beyond, into the public sphere. God’s actions are free and not dependent upon human appropriation, but they are aimed at empowering whole-person, clearly embodied, human appropriation. The aim of the sacraments is sanctification: God’s people gradually become symbols themselves, both revealing and camouflaging God’s action in the world. The aim of God’s Word is for the people to become God’s own speech in the world.

Karl Barth hints at the God’s dual work in preaching and sacraments toward a human fulfillment:

“Preaching, then, is given within that church, where the sacrament of grace and the sacrament of hope are operative, but each partakes at once of the character of grace and hope, for neither sacrament nor preaching has significance except within the church, where each is authenticated by its relation to the other. Preaching, in fact, derives its substance from the sacrament which itself refers to an action in the total event of revelation. And we should know that all those who hear are baptized and called to partake of grace, and what has been thus begun in them will be fulfilled.”

God’s Word and deed in preaching and the sacraments are mutually authenticating but only as they, together, empower hearers and partakers to appropriate them. As Mary Catherine Hilkert puts it, “Preachers announce a word of life that empowers the conversion it demands.”

The internal, personal, psychological work of preaching and sacraments seek external, communal, active, ethical performance. This makes the worship service into something far more meaningful than just the setting for the jewel of the sermon; the worship service and the sacramental, ritual actions within it become the first communal embodiments of the gospel preached and prayed in the worship context. The liturgy is our first opportunity to appropriate grace in our bodies. In a sense worship is a safe space in which to practice the ethical implications that have been born in the hidden recesses of the individual psyche and will. Worship, in this sense, is like a playground where we can try on that “new creation” of which H. Grady Davis spoke. William Skudlarek addresses this concept of preaching and sacraments:

Worship, or liturgy, or sacrament, then, is something far more than the setting of the sermon.... [Worship is preaching’s] end, purpose, and goal. To say this is not to deny that preaching is to bring people to faith, or that it is to have an influence on their behavior. Rather, it is to affirm that faith and obedience are both to go one step further and be transformed into praise and thanksgiving.

We would offer that perhaps faith and obedience should go two steps further through praise and thanksgiving into ethics and service. In the church we have made a grave error in

93 Hilkert, Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination, 45.
delineating a false dichotomy between different types of human action in response to grace. We have named much of our in-church response to God as “worship” and our out-church response to God as “ethics” or “witness” or “outreach” or “mission”. Regardless of the labels, we have made a division between “sacred” human response (worship) and “profane” human response (ethics). Some count the former as more important than the latter and vice versa. Rather, we might view all human response to God’s empowering activity as worship; we worship God through rituals of thanksgiving, praise, lament, and confession; we worship God as we respond to the world with compassion and justice. All of these are embodied appropriations of divine grace. And they build upon each other in the same way that our own human imaginations become the birthplace of our eventual actions. David Buttrick charts this trajectory by noting that in-church preaching leads to Eucharist which leads to identity formation which leads to ethics: “Eucharist as a new humanity cannot be locked up in church.”\textsuperscript{95} Worship bears this congregational new creation out into the world to continue its worship; and then worship limps back again on the eighth day dragging us, her “dead” and failed along with her, to be resurrected yet again by Word and deed, speech and symbol. We always enter liturgical worship bringing our dead: our dead language, our dry scriptures, our brackish water, our cracked chalices. And we enter with joy because time and again they are passed through the hands of Christ and returned to us full of life and freshly renewed, perhaps not every week, or perhaps they are and sometimes we lack the eyes to see it.

Authentic preaching is that preaching which does more than give folk an interesting twist on the Sunday’s lections; it does more than move the heart or even the gut by its poetics without being taken up into a congregant’s testimony of faith or ethical act. Many

\textsuperscript{95} Buttrick, \textit{Homiletic: Moves and Structures}, 231–232.
proscriptions against “pulpiteering” speak from the homiletical literature of the New Homiletic. This word seems to indicate an inability to connect the performance of the sermon with the realities of life as congregants leads them each day. Inauthenticity in preaching can be the result of failing to listen to the church’s whole worship, including the worship which occurs in daily life as they brought their faith into ethical practice. Charles Rice finds that

The sacramental context, both Baptism and Holy Communion, judges preaching, sets limits to it, calls to account mere sermonizing and pulpiteering,...The origin of preaching is Baptism, and the aim of the sermon is Eucharist. The preacher stands between font and table, Scripture in hand, leading the people once more, because of and in spite of all that may have happened that week, to renew their Baptism and come to the table... This crucial act [holding together life’s realities and the call to faithful prayer] calls for embodiment, a person who lives with the community, who experiences and articulates the people's suffering, and who leads them to give thanks nevertheless.96

The preacher receives the “people’s suffering” and models, through appropriation, a fresh confession of faith in God’s action. The celebrant washes and feeds the people and sends them back out renewed. The people witness and testify to their faith in God out in the world. All of this is human worship and all of this is also God’s act. And, all of it is freely offered. But when the preacher does not listen to the people’s “sermons” about their worship-by-ethics out in the world, a lacuna is opened which threatens the whole process of worship in and out of church. For this reason, Rice opines that, in the face of pluralism and a lack of social cohesion, the “preacher will have to rely more and more, like the Christian community itself, upon liturgy--the enactment in a community of what it most deeply believes--for the apprehension of the gospel and the completion of the sermon.”97

We cannot emphasize the following point enough, for it, in ways, is our thesis in miniature: The living of the gospel (proclaimed in and empowered by sermon and sacrament) is what gives authenticity and authority to preaching and liturgy. Hilkert says it well:

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96 Rice, The Embodied Word, 19. For more on the inauthenticity of “pulpiteering” see Buttrick, A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching, 43.

Jesus' own preaching reveals the sacramental paradigm: his words were enfleshed in his actions and in his very person. He announced the reign of God in word and deed. He forgave sins not only by words of forgiveness but by eating with sinners. He announced the healing mercy of God by touching lepers. He taught community by celebrating with his disciples. He challenged preconceived social roles by talking with and loving Samaritans, tax collectors, prostitutes. Jesus told the story of God by sharing ordinary human experience and transforming it through his presence, words, and actions. So, too, contemporary preachers can announce compassion, healing, mercy, and hope only if the community and the preacher are involved in making those words concrete realities. This living of the gospel life in fidelity to the gifts of the Spirit bestowed in baptism and confirmation becomes the source and the power and authority to preach the gospel.  

Janowiak also finds that embodiment of the gospel is the authenticating norm of the gospel itself: “The authenticity of the proclaimed word...can be measured by the ‘historical consequences’ of the lived experience of Christians practicing what they preach.... [H]ow the community values the Scriptures as a normative guide ultimately expresses itself in the way they use them and the vehicles with which they choose to communicate their importance.”  

What if, however, Eucharist does not bleed out into ethical practice? What if, contra Buttrick, the Eucharist is locked up in the church? Charles Campbell quotes Michael Warren, who noted the collusion of bishops and generals in Argentina in celebrating an annual Military Mass, even while thousands of people were being murdered by the military regime for opposing the government. Warren wonders, “When what the community does outside the ritual space is a countersign of the gospel, the sign value of what it does within the ritual space has little effect. Worse, the Eucharist could be a ritual lie.” These are harsh words, but apt for some performances of Word and sacrament in North American culture. Detached from the daily worship of “coming out” as Christian in an increasingly post-Christian culture, separated from the work of the Spirit beyond the sanctuary and into public life, resisting and overturning the inhumane, preaching, too, can be a “ritual lie.” If nothing is appropriated, if

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no change is wrought, no new confession brought to voice, no practice of grace undertaken by hearers or by preachers beyond the pulpit or table, then one might suspect that the sermon either 1) so colludes with the culture that no change is deemed necessary; or 2) the sermon does not fund the change that it calls for. Warren concludes, “The quality of the community’s worship is determined more by the quality of the community’s life structure, that is, actual patterns of living, than by the quality of the words spoken or the rituals enacted during worship. Put more simply: the sacramentality of worship and the sacramentality of life practice cannot be divorced.”

CONCLUSION

We will now indicate some homiletical trajectories that flow from these themes. What does it mean for preaching to be sacramental and why should it be? For us, a sacrament is a material symbol which fertilizes the imagination with the potential for an embodied response, an appropriation. This imagination may be an individual’s imagination or a social sense of imagination such as that experienced in Christian liturgy. A sacramental homiletic, then, will consider the sermon’s relationship to action on at least four levels.

First, the sermon will discover God’s action in the text as its basis. How has God’s movement in human life, captured in the text, changed hearts and minds and thereby called forth appropriation in respect to the literary genre being preached? The New Homiletic has often been concerned with how sermons are experienced in human consciousness. A sacramental homiletic will be most concerned with how the divine imagination and action in

\[101\] Ibid., 141.
the text overlaps and empowers human imagination (individually and socially) at the intersection which is worship.

Second, the sermon itself will be sacramental in that the preacher’s speech will hearken to God’s own speech as wine does to blood. By indicating God’s action in the text, the sermon will become sacramental via the metaphoric impulse as it both speaks about that divine action, but, more importantly, appropriates that action in the present tense. Just as the cup is raised in blessing during the Eucharist in “remembrance” of Jesus’ own action on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, so also the sermon will become an example of (not just about) God’s action in the present. As David Lose has recently stated, sacramental preaching shifts from pastoral performance to congregational participation.102 Instead of preaching a sermon about God’s blessing, the congregation could participate by blessing each other.

Third, the preacher should consider the liturgy more deeply as the first place of appropriation, of congregational confession of and participation in divine action. If the liturgy is only and ever comprised of the same rote elements, week in and week out, then the chance is quite good that the language used in those elements will be automatized and dead. Having a mass in the vernacular may be no more meaningful than one in Latin! The sermon and the liturgy as well should seek a fresh poetic rendering of divine action.103 Understandably, some portions of the liturgy, in particular the sacraments, may be unalterable for some. But even the most rigid of traditions usually have room for liturgical

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103 However, we will also warn that too much change in the language of worship and the employment of more than one fresh image or metaphor in any sermon can be confusing, distracting, and may frustrate the listener. We encourage preachers to change one thing at a time or per service. Thus, that single metaphor may dance with the congregation fully and participate in forming and reforming Christian identity.
material that is proper to the day. The sermon, being the most unscripted moment of most liturgies, is ripe for fresh imagery and the New Homiletic provides excellent guidance in how to communicate via image. Still, how might the sermon seed the liturgy with possibilities for individual and corporate appropriation, both in the sacraments, but also with other acts? How might the sermon invite response that would qualify the liturgy as a space to imaginatively play with what it might mean to confess faith in Christ?

Fourth, the sermon might more thoroughly portray (or at least suggest) what it might look like to live out Christian faith in certain contexts. This could easily devolve into moralizing prescriptions for action, but preaching does not have to do that. Rather, preachers can struggle to model, both in the sermon and in general ministry, faithful response to God’s action, indeed even participation in God’s action in the world. In other words, the sermon might imagine what it looks like for a person or people to become God’s sacrament in the world. This sounds rather quaint in the telling, but, as we have seen, sacraments can be performances which subvert ideologies and counter prevailing cultural norms with gospel practices.

A sermon as an event of sacramental performance will engage both the imagination and the body. Sacramental preaching will not be satisfied with a pastoral performance of a text that only inspires an individual psychological experience on the part of the hearer with no appropriation on their part. Sacramental preaching will also not be satisfied with other-focused ethical action alone without close regard to the biblical text and its reference to a God at work in the world. Sacramental preaching reveals that the origin of Christian confession is faith in Christ’s justification of human life. The aim of Christian confession is participation in Christ’s sanctification of human life.
Chapter 6
Toward the Practice of a Sacramental Homiletic of Appropriation

The impulse which shapes this chapter is the final assertion in the previous chapter, that appropriation to the point of action authenticates the Word of God. If indeed sacramental preaching reveals that the origin of Christian confession is faith in Christ’s justification of human life, and if the aim of Christian confession is participation in Christ’s sanctification of human life, then what practices in preaching and in the teaching of homiletics will benefit preachers toward these ends? We will now suggest some practical strategies which may be used to encourage preachers and hearers alike to own the gospel, in mind and body, for themselves.

This chapter is comprised of four sections. First, we will briefly examine some trends in emerging Christianity that point to appropriation as an important homiletical quality in the spiritualities whose leading edges we are beginning to see. We will also begin to build some bridges between these spiritualities and more traditional Christian expressions of church. Next, we will offer some practical suggestions for building sermons and liturgies that help preachers and planners to think of the sermon and the liturgy as a single whole. A sample sermon of ours that employs these suggestions is included as an appendix. Third, we will comment on the effects that our work might have upon the teaching of preaching. Lastly, we will summarize and conclude this chapter and thesis. Along the way we will draw upon the homiletics of Paul Scott Wilson, in particular The Four Pages of the Sermon, as an aide to our enterprise. The homiletics of David Lose will serve as both example and inspiration.
I. The Emerging Church Movement: A Source of Hope?

As we began the work that built toward this thesis, we were very interested in what we were seeing in emerging Christianity. Appropriation is apparently a key concern on the leading edge of faith community development. In the various sorts of emerging communities we were observing we noticed, across the board, a heightened interest in the body and a decrease in interest around speech and words. This seemed to be true whether in in-church activities or out-church activities. Emerging Christian communities might still have some form of sermon or study, but what made those communities unique was an emphasis on spiritual practices, liturgical forms, and ritual acts that are not part of their grandparents’ church experience. Rather, these acts draw on the creative life of the emerging community as a colony of artisans of sorts. Using art, poetry, prayer, and other kinds of concrete physical stimuli, these worshippers are anything but passive. They are actively engaging the scriptures in real time, sometimes more successfully than others perhaps, but they are engaged.

Sacramentality is a key component to their religious practice. Similarly, participants are placing their bodies into service in the world by performing meaningful ministries in their communities and beyond, not being content to simply hear a sermon, write a check, and head home.

Emerging Christianity, then, presents an invitation to think about appropriation and about how sermons can open possibilities for embodied response to God’s action. Part of our hope is that mainline and traditional Christianity can learn some lessons from emerging Christianity. In this section we assert that emerging church models are coalescing around the notion of embodied appropriation as normative and an authenticating feature of worship. While the emerging movements unfortunately do not evince tremendous homiletical
innovation, they do reflect considerable liturgical innovation that could be a model for more traditional churches.

A. Appropriation as Believing with the Body

Appropriation can often reveal to us the difference between what we say that we think and believe versus what we believe in so greatly that we are willing to engage our bodies with action in support of that belief. Deconstructive Christian philosopher Peter Rollins, in a blog post from 2011, outlines the difference between cognitive beliefs (that conscious set of assertions, doctrines and dogma that can express our desires and values) and operative beliefs (those conscious and unconscious beliefs that we embody that actually perform what we really value and desire):

Take the example of buying chocolate from a corner shop. If I know, or suspect, that the chocolate is made from coco [sic] beans picked by children under the conditions of slavery then, regardless of what I say, I believe in child slavery. For the belief operates at a material level (the level of what I do) rather than at the level of the mind (what I tell myself I believe). And I can’t hide in supposed ignorance either for if I don’t know about how most chocolate is made it is likely that my lack of knowledge is a form of refusal to care. For the very fact that there is Fair Trade chocolate, for example, should be enough for me to ask questions about whether other chocolate is made in an unfair way.¹

We are prone, especially among Protestants, to think of God’s Word as something that operates at the level of belief by the conscious mind. What Rollins reveals here is that often these conscious, cognitive beliefs mask and cover over what we really believe, that which we live out bodily no matter what we say we believe. In Wesleyan terms, what we believe is what we practice. In Ricoeurian terms, that belief or faith or text which is alien to us is discovered to be part of us, made our own, appropriated. That which we practice and confess we have first “believed,” perhaps not in the dogmatic sense of intellectual confession but in

the “heart” as the Apostle Paul puts it.² Rollins redefines confession in a full-throated sense:
“…to confess with ones lips means to speak love, grace and mercy and that to believe in ones [sic] heart means to demonstrate these virtues in the very texture of ones [sic] life…. For me Christianity is … nothing less than a material faith i.e. a mode of being that transforms ones [sic] material actuality.”³ Salvation is expressed not simply in relative change, but real change.

One wishes, however, that Dr. Rollins would have continued on in his commentary on Romans for a few more verses where we hear Paul tell the church that everyone who calls out for salvation will be received by God with generosity. Paul steps back from the point of action and confession and looks for the origin of belief (even in Rollins’ heartfelt sense) that makes confession possible. Paul probes to discover how that belief came to be registered in the heart:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?⁴

For Paul, the source of appropriated faith is proclamation, God’s Word raining into the soil of human life, irrigating the heart with possibilities that could not otherwise be considered apart from the narratives of God’s life and speech encountered in both the Scriptures and the preacher. Still, Rollins’ point obtains: If you want to know what someone believes, observe how they act in concert with what they say. If it isn’t appropriated in the body, then it isn’t really believed.

² Romans 10: 8-10 – “But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.”

³ Rollins, “I Believe in Child Labour, Sweatshops and Torture.”

⁴ Romans 10:14
However, this is NOT to say that the task of the sermon is to “gin up” folks’ actions to match their confessions or their cognitive, doctrinal beliefs. To give listeners a mission that they ought to fulfill is to cast them back upon their own feeble resources and is a source of trouble in the sermon and not grace.\footnote{Paul Scott Wilson, \textit{The Practice of Preaching} (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 169–170.} Rather, the sermon as an act of appropriation could open up possibilities for what confessions and actions might look like when we get to appropriate them and not as we have to do them.

\textbf{B. Appropriation in the Partnership of Preaching and Liturgy}

The New Homiletic has been on the right track in leading preachers and their hearers away from propositionally-based preaching toward inductive and narrative styles of preaching that foreground the eventfulness of God’s Word; the New Homiletic sermon can be an experience of God’s grace that, as we have seen, forms Christian identity or re-forms it. Beliefs, in the creedal sense, are not always the cause of the New Homiletic sermon; they are often the result of the sermon or of the experience of God’s Word in many sermons.

When we view emerging churches across the theological spectrum we see communities who are exceptionally interested in action on both the confessional and ethical levels. Christians in emerging churches are both demanding and being encouraged to embody faith perhaps even before knowing exactly what those beliefs might be. Emerging Christians are embodying faith through ritual, liturgy, and they are embodying faith through ethical action in the world. They are clearly seeking a more fully integrated sense of what faith means and does.
An emphasis on experience and action is evident in a reversal of the traditional “believe-behave-belong” discipleship model often favored by Protestant Christians: The old model has been that if you believe the right doctrines and behave in certain ways then you qualify to belong to the Christian community. Recent academic observations of the ECM are both recognizing and advocating the trend in Christian communities in which people become part of Christianity via a set of spiritual practices that provide individuals and communities with a fresh language to, finally, express their belief. First, they belong to Christ’s body; then, that belonging prompts certain behaviors; finally, belonging and practice lead them to believe statements and doctrine. In emerging communities, appropriation of Christian faith in the body is the leading concept in the process of conversion. Their embodied practice leads their belief. What this means for preaching is that homiletical methods that emphasize the sermon as an act of appropriation leading to the appropriation of the gospel by others are timely.

The Emerging Church Movement (or ECM, as Tony Jones has called it) has come to deeply value a sense of freedom in its rejection of traditional church structures and models of worship. Included in the rejection, of course, is traditional preaching, called “speeching” by Jones. In their recent analysis of the ECM, Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel identify

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6See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012). See also John S. Bohannon, “Preaching and the Emerging Church: A Homiletical Analysis and Critique of a Select Number of Emerging Church Pastors—Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt—with Contemporary Implications for Evangelical (expository) Preaching” (Ph.D., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), http://search.proquest.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/docview/305159784/abstract/3ACBE40D31CA4B25PQJ?accountid=14771. Bohannon discovers in the work of Dan Kimball a similar reversal in the “faith decision process.” The modern mindset is most influenced by facts which influence belief which then influence behaviour. The postmodern mindset is most influenced by experience which influences behaviour which consequently influences belief.

preaching as one of four congregational practices that are being “deconstructed” in emerging churches. For the ECM, gone are the days when “The preacher delivered his [sic] sermon front and center, with a largely silent and passive audience who did not, except on rare occasions, challenge his [sic] message or his [sic] interpretations of the Bible.” Rather, Marti and Ganiel find the ECM employing two other approaches to preaching. First, they discover a *communitarian* approach which…

..subverts the Reformation-style model of a preacher speaking *at* an audience. Those gathered are not considered audience members but participants. Dressing down and adopting an unassuming manner, the leaders—if there is one or a handful identifiably present—are facilitators of conversation. Communitarian preaching is conversational and not confrontational. Everyone is given an opportunity to share their thoughts without the obligation to do so.

The emphasis in their description is on a flattened sense of hierarchy in speech and in dress. Still, an authorized someone leads a Scripture-based conversation. In the case of Doug Pagitt and Solomon’s Porch, he sits in a swivel chair in the centre of the room and facilitates. While the hierarchy is flattened, he is often still in the centre of things, directing conversational “traffic.” Without a doubt, however, the people get to bring their own voices to the experience. But is that a guarantee that they have *appropriated* God’s Word? Doubtless, it does not. Is this really new method? Perhaps it is new for churches in the sense that it is happening in the primary weekly worship service. However, one might go to a Wednesday night Bible Study at lots of mainline and evangelical Protestant churches in any week of the year and find clergy leading a feisty discussion with laity about the biblical text. The difference, of course, is that some ECMs allow this sort of free response *during* the worship service.

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The second preaching form that Marti and Ganiel recognize in the ECM is *provocative* preaching. Interestingly, their description sounds like good, old-fashioned prophetic preaching to us:

The provocative preacher…delivers an uninterrupted, energetic monologue, with the intent to shake familiar notions, move to unexpected rhetorical spaces, and push listeners to reflection….The provocateur in the ECM is not comfortable being the functional representative of the faith on behalf of the faithful, but sees him- or herself as the point of instigation to mobilize others into taking a stand somewhere….The provocateur…moves away from easing anxieties to raising them, from a comforting tone to removing a too-easy smugness, from giving assurance to urging individual initiative and risk-taking.\(^9\)

Marti and Ganiel see these two types of preaching as “alternative practices developed in the aftermath of the deconstruction of the long or staid monologue sermon.”\(^10\) While this style of preaching may seem like “alt-preaching” to the ECM, we believe that portions of the New Homiletic have espoused this sort of provocative approach for some time. Provocateurs are exegetes and hermeneuts, talking heads, and monologists, which seems to us pretty “old-school.” What makes this sort of preaching seem “nouveau,” we believe, is the liturgical space that ECMs open up for people to respond to preaching. While the two styles of preaching that Marti and Ganiel discover do not, in themselves seem to be tremendously innovative, the freedom available to ECMs to shape liturgy in ways that allow for and encourage appropriated response to preaching is the gift that they are offering to “old-school” mainline and evangelical churches, as well as perhaps to Anglican and Roman Catholic churches.

Marti and Ganiel devote much more time and space to their descriptions of ECM liturgy than to preaching, and what characterizes their description is that “[e]veryone can

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\(^9\) Ibid., 123–124.

\(^10\) Ibid., 125.
respond to God in their own way.”  

As we read their analysis, what seems to be working for ECMs is a heightened sense of sacramentalism, experimental “re-traditioning” of classic rituals, multi-sensory experience, pre-Reformation theological influence, and monastic discipline. Ritual forms are not permitted to gain a sense of permanence, nor are responses dictated: “… Emerging Christians’ liturgies are open, designed to cater to a pluralist congregation that makes everyone—even atheists or unbelievers—feel welcome to participate. Times of ‘open response’ are a common feature in ECM services, a general time in which those present are given options of what they may do as part of the liturgy—including the option to sit in their chair and do nothing.”

Interestingly, these liturgical features are the ones that may bear the most fruit for a truly sacramental sermon! Christian churches in the 21st century need to move beyond the “long and staid” forms of our recent configurations and crack open the calcified, dead, and automatized language games which keep preachers chained to pulpits and people frozen into the pews. In our thinking, one key to appropriation is the ritualized ability to respond by participating, with some guidance, both in the sermon and in the surrounding acts of worship. If the worship service is the first place where people can make God’s Word their own, then worship should make room for God’s Spirit in the hearer to appropriate response to God’s Spirit in the preaching. We simply must not let our physical architecture as well as the mental architecture of our assumptions promote a sense of antinomian malaise in the worshipping community, and appropriation is an important part of this process. What might

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11 Ibid., 130ff. We note here that the opposition of sermon to liturgy seems to unfortunately continue into the consciousness of the emerging church. It is notable that Marti and Ganiel classify preaching separately from liturgy.

12 Ibid., 130–131.

13 Ibid., 131.
happen, if we take appropriation seriously, is a more thorough connection between sermon and liturgy, understanding that their origin and aims are one and the same: active participation in the making of meaning and the authenticating of Christian faith by something more thorough than doctrinal belief alone.

What follows are some suggestions for helping preachers and listeners alike to appropriate God’s word. All of these strategies are aimed either from or to the sermon. However, connections with liturgy and ethics will be apparent.

II. **Practical strategies toward the appropriation of God’s Word**

   A. *Using concrete imagery to unify sermon and liturgy*

      From a linguistic point of view, metaphor is the vehicle which makes appropriation possible. Metaphor renders God’s action in the biblical text as present and opens possibilities for action that may be taken up into the minds and bodies of preachers and hearers. A metaphor, from Ricoeur’s point of view, operates not at the level of the word but at the level of the sentence. Strangely modified nouns are not enough to form a complete metaphor. However, verbs alone are not either. Metaphors function on the level of the sentence where nouns and verbs together project possible worlds into our future.¹⁴

   i. **Nouns render metaphors that are specifically Christian.**

      We assert that concrete nouns in the biblical text are an important aid to sacramentality in preaching. Anna Carter Florence recently advocated that preachers should look to the verbs/action of the biblical text as a hermeneutical bridge from then to now. In a

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lecture in 2011, she called for a “verbs first” reading of the text.\footnote{Anna Carter Florence, “Preaching the Verbs” (Sermon, Lester Randal Preaching Fellowship, Yorkminster Park Baptist Church, 2011), http://www.yorkminsterpark.com/gather/past-lecturers.php. Carter Florence has included this same idea in her 2012 Lyman Beecher Lecture Series, which may be viewed at http://divinity.yale.edu/videos?field_video_catagory_value_many_to_one=All&field_video_year_value_many_to_one=All&field_lecture_series_vid_value_many_to_one=All&field_video_topics_value_many_to_one=Preaching as of January 20, 2015.} For her, biblical nouns tend to refer to anachronistic ideas that bear little resemblance to modern life: When have we seen kings or shepherds? Most of us no longer plant seeds or harvest grain. Conversely, human actions continue to be recognizable across time. While we agree with Carter Florence that this can be a helpful way to approach the text, we are convinced that the most durable symbols of the biblical text reside in the nouns: cross, blood, Christ, God, etc. The nouns may contain the most difficult concepts to translate into contemporary life, but they are what render the text specifically Christian.

The sentence is a linguistic structure that places nouns and verbs in concert with one another. They together form Christian biblical imagery. For instance, the mere fact that some nondescript thing is taken, blessed, broken and given is not enough to form a symbol. Actions alone cannot anchor the mind in a concrete form capable of repetition across time. Similarly, the mere fact that bread rested on a table before Jesus is not, on its own, sufficient to convey the symbol of the Eucharist. The noun, bread, must be taken, blessed, broken, given, and interpreted (“This is my body…”) for the symbol to arc across time and into the contemporary moment to engage the imagination toward the possibility of action. Nouns alone and verbs alone do not form metaphors adequate to our task as preachers. The nouns in the text give the human mind the concrete imagery that make verbs powerful. The nouns form a constellation of symbols that bind us to other Christians across time. The verbs,
however, allow signification to burst into the mind and fuel the possibility for appropriation in embodied human practice.

This binding and bursting power of language can form an important link between liturgy and preaching at the level of the worship service. Consider that symbols and metaphors exist on the same continuum. Both are forms of signification. Religious symbols exist on the concrete end of the spectrum of signification, e.g. water, wine, bread, cross, etc. They tend to perdure through time. Metaphors, on the other hand, dwell more toward the abstract end of signification; they are based in language and are ephemeral. They can be quite powerful at their birth, but can also become easily clichéd and die, losing the power to meaningfully signify.

ii. Symbols and Metaphors in Liturgy and Preaching

In our opinion and experience, the entire Christian symbolic universe is contained in a single metaphoric idea: God acts. God not only is, as a matter of faith, but acts, as a matter of witness. God-in-action is the most radical of all root metaphors in the Judeo-Christian orbit, taking up the others into itself. The incarnation of Christ reveals God’s action in emptying herself to take on human nature. The water of Christ’s baptism remembers God’s actions of redemption through Red Sea and Jordan, but also seals Christ’s identity as one acted upon by God through God’s claiming and loving. The cross reveals God’s willingness to endure suffering as the consequence of the actions of love taken in the ministry of Christ. All of these actions and their significances are debatable. This is what Christian theology does. But these symbolic elements seek to bind the debate down to this claim, this confession: that God acts. God empties, God reveals, God speaks, God adopts, God suffers. God acts. God has
acted in creation, in history, and in redemption; so, this is also a claim about humanity, but the root metaphors are first about God’s action. The subsequent metaphoric move places the tenor of contemporary life into the vehicle of God’s action. Where the symbol says that God acts, the metaphor suggests that God acts now.

Liturgy operates more toward the symbolic mode of root Christian metaphors. Liturgy continually offers the sensate and the tactile to both the bodies of Christians and the Body of Christ as a way of claiming God’s action in the present. While the church authorizes priests and pastors to baptize, we claim that baptism with water is God’s act through the church. While the priest’s ears hear the confession, it is God’s forgiveness that is being offered back to the penitent. While the church sets the table, it is God who serves as the host. How can we tell that these are root metaphors functioning in symbolic ways? We can pay attention to the way we use language around liturgical acts. When someone is baptized, we do not use conditional forms or subjunctive moods to indicate what happened: “Well, the pastor put some water on that person’s head. She might be baptized.” “Pastor heard my confession today. I could be forgiven.” No, these modal forms are set aside in favour of the declarative: “I baptize you. You are thus baptized.” “Your sins are forgiven.” There is no “might be.” This indicates ritual efficacy and an exercise of something more durable than metaphor.16

Still, parts of liturgies often function in a more metaphoric mode. Hymns, prayers, and other acts of worship are often more suggestive of connections than fixative. We replace

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16 This is why liturgical change, to be effective, usually must come slowly with intense deliberation. It is no accident that the festal cycles in many liturgical traditions are also bound to natural elements. The Advent-Christmas-Epiphan cycle is a solar cycle dependent upon the winter solstice for much of its metaphoric power. The Lent-Easter-Pentecost cycle is a lunar cycle. These natural movements collect and intersect with the deepest metaphors of Christian belief and practice: stars in the east (Epiphany), moons which turn to blood (Pentecost – Acts 2:20), etc.
hymns from week to week; propers adapt to seasonal, calendrical, and occasional needs. But the cross is not replaceable. Ritual acts, among other things, bind the participants to these material Christian symbols. The promise of such ritual acts is that God will be understood and experienced as active. The pitfall of them is that they will begin to be experienced as their own telos or be manipulated to invest a class of ritual performers or authorizers with too much personal power.

Preaching, on the other hand, is more linguistic in nature. It, too, is a ritual act of performance, but it is a rhetorical act which seeks out the “available means of persuasion” as Aristotle might put it. To what are the listeners being persuaded? The preacher offers as a matter of faith that God still acts. At its best, preaching discovers the action of God in the text and then, in a metaphoric mode, brings that confession of action close to contemporary life to see what sparks. The “four page” method of Paul Wilson proceeds in just this fashion. In exegesis, the preacher asks many questions of the text; but, the primary question asked is “What is God doing in or behind this text?” The answer to this question should form the theme of the sermon: God (in one of the three persons of the Trinity) + an active verb + objects and modifiers, e.g. “God calls Moses” or “Jesus gives life.” The next move is to discover where God is performing the same sort of action today. The vehicle, “Jesus gives life,” might carry the tenor of a refugee family in the local community who have discovered new potential and possibility through the ministry of the local church.

The point in such exempla is to feature God’s action that can only be claimed by faith. Thus, preaching is declarative when speaking of God’s action in the text, closer to the root metaphors, and is more subjunctive when suggesting God’s action in the present: “Could that be God’s work blossoming in the life of that family? By faith, I believe that it could.”
Preaching bursts the commonplace through confession; preaching helps the congregant to see the world as shot through with the presence and action of God. It relies on those durable nouns, those root metaphors preserved by the text for its power, its authority. Most of the time preaching operates in this “could it be” mode, which is why preaching can suggest metaphoric connections in a more capricious, mercurial way than liturgy and suffer little criticism. In fact, listeners expect that the sermon will use metaphoric language to burst assumptions about their quotidian horizons of life.

Nevertheless, just as liturgy operates also in the metaphoric mode, preaching can also operate in a more symbolic mode, that potentially draws the listener toward the root metaphors of the faith in an experience of numinous power. Gerhard Forde offers that proclamation is a type of “primary discourse” of self-disclosure in the present tense. When the lover asks “Do you love me?” the beloved does not typically go on to reflect about love in the abstract: “Well, that is an interesting question. What is love after all?” Rather, the only discourse that will do the job is the first-to-second-person declaration of love: the “I love you.” For Forde, preaching should not just explain the text but be a “doing of the text to the hearers, a doing of what the text authorizes the preacher to do in the living present.”

iii. Connecting Scripture’s deep metaphor to God’s action then and now.

Thus, one helpful way to unify both sermon and liturgy around a claim of God’s action is to search the text of one’s choosing for that concrete image that can be connected with God’s action in some way. Other imagery may be included in the sermon, but symbols that connect to God’s action will help the listener appropriate the good news of God’s

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17 Gerhard O. Forde, Theology is for Proclamation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 3.
activity in our world, to name God into their own world and to act and speak \textit{as if} that God is still acting. For instance, in the Wedding at Cana passage in John 2, water and wine are used as images of God’s action in Jesus Christ. How can the sermon “metaphorize” God’s action by setting this metaphor alongside the horizons of our own experience: “Jesus changes water into wine”? In fact, John’s several “I AM” sayings by Jesus make for helpful connections because they name aspects of God’s work in Jesus toward our world in very concrete ways: I am the good shepherd; I am the true vine; I am the bread of life. Again, on their own, they are simply inert nouns. But combined with a verb they become more available to see in action within the horizons of our own experience: The good shepherd \textit{guides} or \textit{protects}; The true vine \textit{empowers}; The bread \textit{satisfies}. Such symbols might even be used in the worship setting. It would be easy enough for people to interact with wine, water, vines, or bread alone. However, the verb added to the noun makes the whole image which helps worshipers to clearly visualize God at work today. The liturgy best emphasizes the \textit{symbolic} nature of the image; the sermon best emphasizes the \textit{metaphoric} nature of the image. When this happens the door to appropriation opens wide.

Different genres of biblical literature are more conducive to this approach than others. But still, if a helpful concrete image is not presented by the text, one from outside the text may be used. For instance, in the sermon we have included here as an appendix, we were struggling to find an image that would help people connect with the theme statement of the sermon: God is at work in unexpected places. In this text John the Baptist is trying hard to recognize God’s work in Jesus. We took him as a sort of type for all of us who are trying to find God at work in our world. We settled on the idea of a nimbus (line 96) that we carried through as a metaphor into the sermon and beyond. But the nimbus is only \textit{half} of the image.
The whole image requires a verb. So for us, a *nimbus names God* into the landscape. This is what we become able to do by virtue of God being at work in unexpected places.

Let us examine this sermon for a moment to determine how the biblical text bends toward appropriation. The theme sentence for the sermon is that “God is at work in unexpected places.” However, John the Baptist is struggling to name God at work in Jesus and asks “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus proceeds to name God at work in himself and in John. So, we proceeded to preach that, with God’s help through the Church and the insight of the Holy Spirit, we, too, could discover God at work in the world and name it. How was this appropriated?

First, the congregants appropriated God’s Word in the act of worship itself. We had several gold dining table chargers that were made available to the congregation that they could as they wished come forward to receive. So the liturgy became the first place that they could “own” God’s Word as they responded bodily in the worship service to come forward and take a plate. Just by doing this they “confess” albeit wordlessly that they intend to participate in naming God into their everyday environments. Second, they appropriated God’s Word as they carried the “nimbuses” into their lives and placed them behind the heads of people that had revealed God’s saving work to them. In doing this, they had to explain to the person that they found God at work in them, thereby confessing, this time with words, their faith in God to the other. Lastly, they appropriated God’s Word by making photo “portraits” of these “saints” with their “nimbuses” and sending them back to the church via email to be used in ensuing worship services. They thereby model for others the action of naming God into their lives.
This kind of appropriation was made possible through an encounter with the biblical text. That encounter caused them to suspend the normal course of events. Not a single person entered the worship space that day expecting to leave with a “nimbus” having agreed to name God at work in unexpected places in their lives. They were invited, not coerced, to consider that possibility and respond. Appropriation happens when people encounter narratives about God’s actions and metaphorize them to include their own lives and worlds. Sermons help people do this.

To summarize this point, we believe metaphors are vital to appropriation; they are formed of concrete nouns and active verbs related to God’s action in the text. Metaphors present the best basis for imaginative preaching of God’s Word that can be appropriated in church worship and beyond.

B. Making the sermon more participatory

Participation in the sermon, in the liturgy and beyond, can be a form of appropriation. After all, the sermon itself is an act of appropriation, the preacher having made a decision to embody the gospel. To invite congregants to join in the preaching in some way affirms the sermon as a model for appropriation. Sermons can provide opportunities for congregants to actually act in the context of worship. David Lose, in his article “Preaching 2.0,” plays off of an idea in website development over the past decades. Whereas “Web 1.0” provided internet users with access to “screenfuls of text”, “Web 2.0” has provided the means whereby users can interact with text, graphics, data, and each other. Lose imagines sermons that can be platforms for congregational action in the context of worship.
Lose begins by acknowledging several ways in which homileticians have encouraged types of participation in our field. First, he notes Charles Campbell’s advocacy for “training hearers in the distinct language of the Christian faith,” equipping them to “redescribe the world” in biblical terms. He also notes the collaborative methods for sermon development by Lucy Rose and John McClure. Others have opened conversation around the notion Christian practice and how preaching connects to other Christian practices. Lastly, he notes how Thomas Long has encouraged clergy and laity alike to give testimony to their faith, both in church and out. While Lose doesn’t use this language, we see these efforts as leaning toward our concept of appropriation.

Lose continues by making several recommendations of his own toward a homiletic that is less centered around the preacher’s performance and more participatory and interactive. He suggests that these be implemented slowly over time in a congregation. First, he counsels preachers to visit congregants “in the venues of the Christian vocations—at home, work, places of volunteer activity.” Preachers need to see the “real lives” of people to bring that experience into preaching. Second, invite hearers to “look for” the biblical message in their daily lives: “Where, that is, do we see a prodigal son (or daughter) in our midst, and what would it mean to run out to receive him or her back?” Third, encourage congregants to feed back what they have seen via email and other means so that the preacher

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19 Ibid., 307–308.
20 Ibid., 308.
21 Ibid. We would add that the homiletics of Anna Carter Florence are very helpful in this pursuit.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 308–309.
can include these insights in subsequent sermons. Fourth, time can be made in the sermon itself for hearers to turn to one another and share insights about how the biblical text connects with their lives. Fifth, people can be invited to share those insights in some part of the worship service, including the sermon. Sixth, such sharing could actually stand in as the sermon occasionally. A group of listeners could meet with the pastor for bible study and reflection, and their reflections might not only inform the sermon but become the sermon. This progression of homiletical practice reveals an increase in congregational appropriation of the matter of the sermon. Where the first suggestion finds the preacher building connections to the everyday lives of congregants, the subsequent ones find congregants encouraged to appropriate Christian proclamation in more and more fulsome ways.

Lose wrote these reflections in 2010 and has continued to take them to heart. A survey of his weekly blog posts, mostly on the Sunday gospel lections, at www.workingpreacher.org and his new site, In the Meantime…, at www.davidlose.net frequently close with an open-ended action that congregants might engage right in the sermon itself. For example, in his commentary on the Second Sunday of Christmas, Year A (John 1:1-18), Lose discovers a difference between the accidents of our lives that describe us over against the deeper qualities that define us:

What is definitive -- and therefore more important than all the good or bad things we carry with us -- is that God has called us God’s own children, individuals who hold infinite worth in God’s eyes, deserve love and respect, and will be used by God to care for God’s beloved world.24 Lose selects God’s action in the text (God has called us…) and invites the preacher to call the hearers to first imagine God’s action (this is the mode of suspension):

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Can we imagine that? That Jesus came and was born, lived, died, and was raised again not simply to pay some obscure “penalty for sin” but rather to remind us and even convince us that God loves us more than anything?  

He then invites readers to practice God’s action in the text (this is the mode of appropriation) by participating in what God is doing:

More than that, can we practice it?... I’d like you to invite your people to begin on this day and continue for the rest of January a simple but profound exercise. Once every day -- and it will be easier if it’s the same time each day -- look in the mirror and say the following: “I am God’s child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world.”

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? But in my experience, these words are actually rather hard to say and even harder to believe. Which is why we need to do it every day for the rest of the month. Because the first few times you say it, you’re likely not to believe it; that is, all those descriptive things about you -- especially those that are difficult or that you don’t like -- will begin to creep in and voice doubts about what you are confessing.

It will sound different for each person, of course, but many of these negative messages will likely run something like this: “You, a child of God? But what about your failed job or marriage? What about when you disappointed your parents or children? And don’t forget about all the missteps and mistakes you’ve made. Yeah, maybe God loves you, but you don’t really deserve that love, and you’re certainly not in a position to change yourself, let alone the world.”

This is why John’s unsentimental Christmas message is so important. Because in the face of all these messages -- many of which are rooted in something that is descriptively true (we have made mistakes, disappointed ourselves and others, and all the rest) -- John asserts that what is definitively true about each and every one of us is that Jesus gives each one of us the “power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” And nothing can change that.

So start by having them say those words aloud -- right now, in the middle of the sermon -- and then invite and even implore them to do so every day for the rest of the month.

By appropriating this good news the hearers may discover themselves empowered to accept God’s definition of who they are, and they may actually participate in God’s action by speaking as God to themselves and to others in the worship space. This is sacramental speech that conforms in a manner to the marks of a sacrament. The concrete symbols here are the words themselves that function much like God’s own speech. They are authorized by Christ in an indirect sense that they are clearly born out of the biblical text and a direct relationship

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
to John’s theology about Jesus. And, as an action it certainly seeks to convey the grace to which it points.\(^\text{27}\)

Lose includes such suggestions for what we could call appropriation at the end of most of his lectionary commentaries. He encourages guided prayer in his comments on John 14:1-14:

So might I suggest a brief exercise in guided prayer to help these Johannine confessions sink in? We don’t do a lot of things like this in my tradition, but on the few occasions I have, they have been quite powerful. So here’s the suggestion, should you want to try it. Invite people to a time of prayer (you can decide if you want to risk asking them to close their eyes!) and to call to mind, first, of some of the people that they have loved and lost. Name them, picture their faces, call to mind what it is you loved about that person. As folks engage in this practice, repeat Jesus’ words: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” You may close this part of the prayer exercise with these words, “Jesus lived, died, was raised again, and ascended to the God that we may have life, here and forever, in abundance. That is his promise.”\(^\text{28}\)

Note that the aim of the appropriation is 1) deeply wedded to the text (encounter); and 2) engaging of hearers’ imaginations to render the concerns of the text as contemporary (suspension) through prayer: “call to mind, first, of some of the people that they have loved and lost. Name them, picture their faces, call to mind what it is you loved about that person.” And then 3) includes a form of embodied practice (appropriation): “… repeat Jesus’ words: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me….“ The words of the biblical text are given verbatim to the congregation to speak. However, now, via this ritual action in worship, the words are broken open and given current significance. Whether through prayer, writing, speaking, or some other ritual action, Lose empowers people through

\(^{27}\) Understandably, playing fast and loose with sacramentality here could be viewed as dangerous, or a slippery sacramental slope down which, once again, anything might be recognized as a sacrament. But we are not interested in opening the “canon” of sacraments. Rather than dangerous, such definition might be viewed as daring or inviting, as rendering God’s gracious speech in present terms.

the vehicle of the sermon to respond within the liturgy. These forms of appropriation become like bridges into the rest of the liturgy.

Sermons could also invite participation outside the worship hour through the use of digital and social media. In his comments on John 2:12-22 (cleansing of the temple) He asks preachers to engage the congregation through social media and email after the worship service. These, too, can be modes of appropriation:

Invite people to share photos of where they see God at work, and start putting those photos on your website, in your newsletter, and on bulletin boards at church. The photos can be of just about anything or anywhere that points to where God's presence is being felt, seen, and made real through the lives, work, and faith of your people. As this collection grows, so will your collective ability to identify the presence and activity of the God who cannot be contained in the Temple of Jesus' day or in our churches today.

In the appendix, the sermon we preached encouraged people to take photos of the expected places that they saw God at work. We collected these photos over the course of the following weeks and were able to share them in worship. This formed a great opportunity for those in our congregation who would never stand and give a verbal witness or testimony to God’s action in their lives to give a “virtual” testimony through those pictures.

C. Sermons can retell human capability in the light of God’s action

As Paul Scott Wilson suggests, sermon preparation should begin with a discovery of theme sentence that is the “major concern of the text.” Wilson coaches preachers to keep the theme sentence short and declarative, with God (in one of the three persons of the Trinity) as the subject and a strong, active verb (“something that creates an image in the mind”). The sentence should focus on an action of God’s grace.


We agree with Wilson that the theme sentence is a key component of sermon preparation because that sentence, as Wilson conceives it, will keep the focus of the sermon on God and on grace, thereby unifying the sermon around that central pole of God’s gracious action (grace or gospel) and not on human requirements (trouble or law). The sermon should be more about what God is doing than about what human beings should, ought, or must do. However, in our estimation, these two levels of action—divine and human—are not discreet, but are interrelated through the concept of appropriation. As we understood from John Wesley in chapter three, the aim of divine activity is restored human capability; the aim of grace (prevenient, justifying and sanctifying) is a renewal of the ability to co-operate with God. God’s actions intend to render us capable of action. In Wilson’s method, pages one and two are focused on the trouble in the text and in the world; pages three and four focus on grace in the text and in the world. We would extend Wilson’s examination of the text to ask a few more key questions of the text to facilitate the move toward appropriation and embodied cooperation with divine agency. Just as Wilson coaches preachers to dip into the text twice—once to hear the trouble and once to hear God’s gracious response to it—we think that preachers should also dip into the human condition twice—once to be clear about our incapacity without grace and once to witness what we may be capable of with God’s help.

In addition to wondering what God is doing in or behind the text, preachers need to ask what response human beings might make to divine action, with the help of the Holy Spirit. Does the text describe or imply what people are now empowered to do because of God’s work or words? For sermons to clearly name the trouble in the text and in the world and then turn to God’s action is indeed key. Humanity needs that movement from trouble to grace. As Wilson offers, “Too often we explore the depth of human trouble and cast
members on their own resources and abilities to make the necessary changes without identifying the help that God offers.” We agree with Wilson that a sermon needs to reflect God’s good parenting of humanity by depicting the move “from brokenness and trouble to restoration and grace.” The sermon should clearly answer, “What is God doing in or behind this text?” The sermon, however, should also consider, “What might God have made possible in human life by this action?” Wilson addresses this question in two sorts of ways.

First, by identifying the trouble in the text and the world, the preacher gets clear in the sermon about what humanity is incapable of doing. Wilson suggests this approach when he encourages preacher to practice “inversion” with concerns of the text. When one discovers the sermon’s theme which speaks to God’s action, one can invert that idea and test it against the content of the text to see if it is a legitimate expression of trouble in the text. For instance, Wilson lists several concerns of the text for Luke 13:31-35, Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem and vow to complete his journey to the cross. Several of these concerns could serve as theme sentences for a sermon. He takes the sentence, “Jesus would be as a mother hen” and inverts it: “We do not choose nurture.” An excellent “backbone” for a sermon could be shaped from these.

We would extend Wilson’s method here to include a second inversion. We claim that the sermon should also reflect a “second naiveté” with the human condition that reveals what humanity might be capable of in the light of God’s grace. Such an inversion should be

31 Ibid., 156.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 39–40.
34 Wilson, The Practice of Preaching, 244–245.
35 Ibid., 245.
suggestive, tempered with the modal verbs of possibility: “By Christ’s power, we could
choose to nurture,” or “With God’s help, we might see ourselves and others as deserving of
love.” A significant portion of Page Four (Grace in the World) might be devoted to this idea.
Ideally, this idea will be related to the listener’s need that the preacher is going to address in
this sermon. In fact, this might be an excellent way of discovering what that need might be.
What we all need, in the light of Jesus Christ, is to be empowered to appropriate the word of
God to the point of our own confession and action. By performing a second inversion from
grace to trouble and then back to grace again, this time reflected through Christ’s flesh and
our own, our imaginations are more clearly stoked with possibility for appropriation.

Bryan Chapell has argued for the determination of a Fallen Condition Focus as the
basis for preaching:

The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share
with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God’s
people to glorify and enjoy him. By assuring us that all Scripture has a Fallen Condition Focus…, God
indicates his abiding care and underscores his preeminent status in preaching….Since fallen creatures
cannot correct or remove their own fallenness, identification of an FCF forces the sermon to honor
God as the only source of hope rather than merely promoting human fix-its or behavior change.36

Chapell’s point is well-taken. Sermons should be about God’s Word and God’s
action. However, a second trip into the human condition will make more clear the
consequences of divine action. To identify our fallen condition and name God into it as the
“hero” of the text is important. However, to leave it there is to ignore the ultimate aim of
God’s heroism: the redemption, renewal and empowerment of human life. This second trip
into the human condition should yield an Empowered Condition Focus, not to return to
anthropocentrism, but to keep the sermon from being stunted into a hero-worship that has no
ultimate point other than to “underscore” God’s pre-eminence. The point of preaching is not

36 Bryan. Chapell, Christ-Centered Preaching Redeeming the Expository Sermon. (Grand Rapids:
merely to elicit an admission that God is a hero or heroine; a wide difference lies between admission and confession. We can admit that we are fallen and that we need God. But we confess God’s power when God has not left us in our poor estate and has given us new capacity for response and obedience, for appropriation. The sermon is about God because it is about humanity. Why did God become human? In our estimation, God became human in Jesus so that God might continue to become human every single day. As Nadia Bolz-Weber recently preached, “The Word became flesh so that our flesh might become Word” and might be able to appropriate God’s gracious action.37 The sermon ideally needs to end with that focus.

In a sermon written to be preached with a group of clergy near Valentine’s Day one year, we chose Matthew 5:38-48, a portion of which reads

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The theme sentence we chose for the sermon was, “God loves abundantly and without condition.” Our four pages for this sermon contained these themes:

Page One: The people had a quid-pro-quo kind of love.
Page Two: We love our ministerial selves conditionally.
Page Three: God loves abundantly and without condition.
Page Four: God loves all of us in ministry, everywhere, all the time.

We believed that it was important to paint a clear picture of what their lives, sanctified by God’s action, might look like. So, we inverted the page two theme into a statement of empowered capability: “With God’s help, we can love and care for ourselves like God does.”

We began page four with strong sentences of unconditional love delivered in the divine first person:

- God’s love is raining on you!
- When you were baptized you heard it, God said I love you!
- When you rise to meet your ministries (ordained or lay), God says, I love you!
- When you can’t get it all done, I love you!
- When you make a pure mess of things, I love you!
- When you look in the full length mirror, I love you!
- When your inner enemy continues to show you how imperfect you are, I love you!
- When you can’t get it all done, I love you!
- When you make a pure mess of things, I love you!
- When you look in the full length mirror, I love you!
- When your inner enemy continues to show you how imperfect you are, I love you!
- When you can’t get it all done, I love you!
- When you make a pure mess of things, I love you!
- When you look in the full length mirror, I love you!
- When your inner enemy continues to show you how imperfect you are, I love you!
- When you fail to do justice, I love you!
- When you preach the word, I love you!
- When [the homebound woman] smiles to see you come, I love you!
- When the children learn that you love them no matter what…I, God, love you!
- Or when they don’t…I, God, love you still.
- And, it is hard to hear this,
- but for those who persistently commit injustice and pervert love,
- God’s love is raining down upon them, too.
- You, having received God’s love down deep to your roots,
  you can go to the very source of injustice
  and give what is asked for
  and loan to all who ask
  and go the second mile.
  You can. You get to.
  You get to bring the Valentine.

We ended the sermon in this way:

- Now we clergy are not perfect
  and our inner voices continue to refuse the valentine of ministry
  that has been given to us to give away.
- But, sometimes, on our best days
  we do let God love us,
  and love us with such abundance that it almost seems silly not to have said yes to it.
- And now we get to do it.
- Now we get to tell people,
  all the people,
  a different story about themselves,
  about who God says they are and might become.
  God loves abundantly, without condition, whole-heartedly, perfectly.
  And having received it, you get to, too.

In a tentative, abstract sort of way, we delivered some images of what sanctified human life might be like in view of the gracious divine action in this sermon. Most pointedly, we cast that image as getting “to tell people…a different story about themselves.” The edge of
appropriation might have even been sharper had we stated the empowered capability verbatim: “With God’s help, we can love and care for ourselves like God does.”

D. Linking the trouble and grace of the sermon more closely into the liturgy

Another method for increasing the amount of embodied response to God’s action is to more thickly connect the concerns of the sermon with the concerns of the worship service itself. This requires advance planning and conceiving of the sermon and the liturgy as a whole rather than as two distinct parts. The key is to let the sermon’s concerns take the lead and shape the liturgy. If the preacher is using “four page” method and terminology as a guide to the construction of a sermon, then that process will yield a wealth of resources which could be used in the liturgy. For instance, if the preacher determines the need and the doctrine which will unify the sermon, then why not employ these in the opening acts of worship, recognizing our trouble as we stand before the gospel on this day. One method of determining the felt need of the congregation, according to Paul Wilson, is to ask this question of the theme sentence: “What question does this answer in the life of a person or people in the church?”38 We imagine that mental and emotional engagement with the question at hand could begin at the moment that worship begins. For instance, with the theme sentence, “God pays the price,” Wilson identifies a need: “How can I begin again?”39 This need could be extended to the Call to Worship or the Prayer of the People. The Call to Worship might read:

  Leader:    God is calling!

39 Ibid., 49.
“All of you who are thirsty, come to the water!
Come to the table! Come, and eat!” (Isaiah 55:1, altered)

People: But our emotional billfolds are bankrupt;
our spiritual accounts are overdrawn.
We can’t buy God’s food and drink!
We owe God and neighbor too much already.

Leader: God is STILL calling!

“Come sit at my table! Come and eat and drink with me!
I have already picked up the tab.
I have paid all of your debt. Be my guest!”

The sermon may then continue to connect with these themes and paint a clearer picture of the struggle involved here in connection with the chosen biblical text.

In a similar way the mission discovered in the development of the sermon could be used in the closing acts of worship such as a Dismissal or Sending Forth, as long as (Wilson carefully cautions) the mission is not something we should, must or ought to do. Rather mission in light of the gospel is what we get to do, that we are empowered to do by God’s action in the text.\(^{40}\) If the Empowered Condition Focus is developed, then that statement could also be used to send the people forth to participate in God’s action and embody God’s Word, to become the sacrament they have experienced. If a celebration such as those enjoyed in the African-American preaching tradition is included as the end of the sermon, then the Empowered Condition Focus should be featured as the outcome of God’s action and the result of God’s successful Word.

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\(^{40}\) Ibid., 206–207.
Frankly, and we understand that this suggestion will not be met with great adulation from many practicing pastors, more time, effort and energy simply must be put into worship than is currently the norm. And as a result, the preacher must engage more and more people from the congregation as a colony of artisans. Who are the people and what are the gifts latent in the congregation that are going underutilized? More time must be spent on each service and more work must be done ahead of time to craft worship that both engages the senses and offers room for response. It is not necessary to succumb to perfectionism in these efforts. However, a little extra time making room for people to appropriate God’s Word bodily may yield a depth of experience and a degree of identity formation and re-formation than we have previously experienced. The service of worship will certainly seem like more of a whole in terms of both its rhetorical force and its ritual effect.

III. How the concept of appropriation might affect homiletical pedagogy

Understanding God’s Word in this way, its *arche* in the genred content of the biblical texts and its *telos* in contemporary confession and ethics, makes us advocate for a process of seminary education that is more integrated across disciplines and fields than it currently is. In fact, in many seminaries the fields of biblical studies, theology, homiletics, liturgy, and ethics are not only taught in separate classes, but often these courses will find themselves silo-ed into four different areas of the curriculum. Perhaps students should learn some basic components of each area first, but we would hope that by the second and third year of the program cross-disciplinary methodology would be taught. Students need to be able, in parish and extension ministries, to follow the thread of God’s Word from the biblical texts through theological interpretation to contemporary proclamation and liturgical practice on to ethical
living and *then back* to the text yet again. This constant spiral of God’s Word through Christian life should be approached in a more integrated way.

Once upon a time, many centuries ago, little difference could be discerned between homiletics, biblical studies, and theology. A few decades ago all of these disciplines served the preaching of the gospel. We suffer under no illusions that the clock could or should be turned back to a day in which our fields are so thoroughly united. However, we assert that homiletics and liturgics are the very best loci and the proper grounds for the consideration of bible, theology and ethics. If the ritual actions of Christian liturgical worship form, as we have said, the point of overlap between God’s imagination and the human imagination, if they are the fulcrum upon which the imagination turns from reproduction of the texts’ concerns to the *production* of possible worlds (in both formative and *re*-formative modes), does it not make sense that preaching and the sacraments (and the sacrament-als, as well) ought to form the heart of the middle and final years of seminary curriculum? How can ministry and life experience (ordained or lay, pastoral care, missional activity, contextual education, etc.) feed into liturgical worship, including preaching, and participate in the projection of possibilities which occurs when brought close to the biblical texts? How might homiletics lead other disciplines toward a more fully appropriated sense of Christian faith?

We envision a course that would employ as a method the theory discussed in this thesis. This would be a second course in homiletics that would build on an introductory course preferably taught using Paul Wilson’s *Four Pages of the Sermon*. We include that outline here as an expression of how homiletical pedagogy can employ this theory:
A. Course Title: Preaching and Appropriation: Crafting Sermons that Empower

Embodied Response

Course Description: In this one-semester course, students will consider preaching in the context of worship as an appropriation of God’s Word that seeks appropriation as God’s word in the lives of hearers. The theological basis for the course is that the church conserves narratives of God’s action in the biblical text so that Christians may recognize and name God’s action in our own day. God’s Word made flesh in Jesus Christ still seeks to be made flesh in the body of Christ as God’s Spirit enables the hearer to respond in actions that are liturgical, confessional, and ethical. This course offers that the sacraments (and the sacramental impulse - for those from a non-sacramental tradition) can be a model for the sermon toward empowering people to appropriate the gospel through meaningful actions. Key theological topics discussed will include incarnation, revelation, sanctification, and sacramental theology. The course will also offer perspectives on the contemporary hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur as they pertain to appropriation in preaching.

Objectives: Students will...

- Understand how the three movements of encounter, suspension, and appropriation work to build a participatory experience.
- Craft a participatory sermon based on course methodology
- Preach the sermon and submit additional liturgical acts written by the student.
- Discover how God’s action found in the biblical text can empower contemporary hearers to appropriate that gospel in acts of liturgy, confession, and ethics.
- Understand and appreciate the relationship between sermon and liturgy as complementary, both aiming toward embodied appropriation.
- Understand how sermons function on a social level to both form and reform Christian identity.

Required Texts:


Photocopied Reader for course with following articles/chapters:

• Lathrop, Gordon W. “Preaching the Cross, Eating the Cross: Reflections on Sacramental Preaching.” Insights (Austin, Tex.) 125, no. 1 (September 1, 2009): 19–21.
• Several of Lose’s sermon commentaries from www.workingpreacher.com and http://www.davidlose.net/ (“...in the meantime”).

Week One: An Introduction to Appropriation

• Introductory Lecture: “My Word Shall Not Return to Me Empty: How the Word of God Empowers Hearers to Respond”
  o This lecture will introduce the ideas in chapter one of this thesis and locate the concept of appropriation in God’s Word through Isaiah, John, Mark and traditional Christologies.
• Students select texts for preaching and liturgy.
• Students form workgroups of two to three and find a set day of the week to meet in person or virtually to discuss readings, lectures and exercises.

Encountering the Biblical Text

Week Two: God’s Action as the Beginning of Appropriation

• To be Read for Class
  o Ricoeur chapter – Reading only from 164 through page 174. This material is dense, but will be explained in class.
  o Wilson, Four Pages – Chapters one, two, four and five
  o Lose, Crossroads – Introduction and Chapter One, “Preaching at the End of the World (as We Know It)
• Mini-Lecture: “The Need for the Concept of Appropriation in Christian Preaching”
  o This lecture will discuss the declining numbers in the mainline and evangelical traditions. Also insights from the emerging church will be identified, in particular the attraction of emerging Christians to a more embodied sense of participation in worship and mission. Include reflections from Lose on “the mystery of preaching” and “telling the old, old story in a new day.”
• Discussion in small groups: What is your experience of sermons and listening to preaching? Have you witnessed sermons that empowered people to appropriate the gospel in specific ways? How?
• Mini-Lecture: “From Text to Action: Appropriation in the Hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur”
The concept of appropriation will be defined as the discovery that the text which was once alien to us is now in fact part of us, our own.

Using poems and scriptures as examples, this lecture will outline Ricoeur’s narrative hermeneutics and explain how the imagination turns from reproducing images from the text toward producing new images that can fund possible action.

Assignment for next class: Examining your chosen text for preaching, using Wilson’s method, identify the various ways that God’s is acting within or behind the biblical text. Choose one of these as the theme for the sermon. Write a paragraph imagining how one might see this action of God in our contemporary world. Identify theme sentences for the other three pages as well [understanding that this is not an intro class for preaching and that the students have some facility with this].

Week Three: Symbols and Metaphors in the Text Aim toward Appropriation

- Read for this class
  - Remainder of Ricoeur chapter, *Imagination*, pp. 174-183
  - Wilson, *Four Pages*, Chapters 8 and 9 on God’s Action in the Bible

- Mini-Lecture: “Ricoeur on the Social Effects of Appropriation”
  - The idea of a social imaginary is described and the spectrum from ideology to utopia is introduced. The healthy and pathological functions of each are described.
  - How genres of biblical literature might function socially in different ways.
  - Perhaps use scenes from *The Matrix* or *Selma* to describe the pathological forms of ideology and the introduction of utopia as a corrective.

- Discussion in small groups and en masse.
  - Scriptures function to fund social action as well as individual action. How might your chosen text function in various contexts? Does your text tend toward sedimenting social identity or subverting/supplanting it? Lose’s concept of “preaching from the center” comments on the communal nature of reading scripture. How do his thoughts enrich our thinking?

  - Discussion of symbols and metaphors on the spectrum of signification. Concrete items and images act like durable symbols whereas language funds metaphors. Explain how both of these cooperate to invite active response. Give Scriptural examples.

- Assignment for next class: What are the symbols and metaphors inherent in your text (or concrete images that can be metaphorized)? Choose one that could function as the central image in your text. Begin writing your sermon, mindful of the four page approach.
Suspension: Imagination between Text and Sermon

Week Four: The Imagination as the “Luminous Clearing” of Possibility

- Read for this class
  - Wilson, *Four Pages*, Chapters 6 & 7 on trouble in the world.
  - Lose, *Crossroads*, Chapter 3, “Preaching Hope in the Secular Age”

- Sermon: “Do You See What I See? A Sermon for Advent 3, Year A”
  - I will preach the sermon and guide discussion on what was heard. Features to be indicated include: A concrete image that can both point back to the text and be utilised in the contemporary liturgy. Discussion will revolve around critique of pastoral and congregational appropriation via the central image.
  - Explanation of the second inversion toward an Empowered Condition Focus. The trouble in the text should help identify congregational need as well as your personal need. Discussion in small groups to discover the need your sermon will speak to based on the trouble in your text.

- Mini-Lecture on Suspension: “Divine Drama: The ‘Play’s’ the Thing”
  - Having established the concerns of the text in an exegetical movement of encounter and a central symbol, metaphor, (image that can be used like a metaphor), the mode of suspension will be explored. Ricoeur’s thinking in both of the essays we have read will be outlined. In particular, we will think of suspension as playing with possibilities and suspending disbelief in an act of poetic faith. Discussion will include reflections on Lose and Hope as a way of thinking about Ricoeur’s productive imagination. In order to appropriate a response, possibilities for action must be produced.

- Written Assignment to be handed in next class session: Answer the following questions – In view of the trouble that you discover in the text, what does your text seem to indicate that human beings are incapable of doing? What are contemporary people incapable of doing without God’s action in this text? What are you personally incapable of doing apart from God’s grace in this world as understood in the text? Write 2-3 paragraphs about how your chosen image might be connected to congregational need.

- Complete pages One and Two of the sermon for preaching in small groups in between classes

Week Five: The Word of God in Preaching and Sacraments

- Read for this class
  - Wilson, *Four Pages*, Chapters 10 and 11, on grace in the world.
  - Lose, *Crossroads*, Chapter 4, “Preaching the Grandeur of God in the Everyday”

- **Mini-Lecture: Letter! Spirit! Action! Luther and Wesley on the Sacraments and Preaching**
  - Reflections on the sacramentality of preaching as the appropriation of meaning through symbols and metaphors will be offered. We will examine Luther’s hermeneutics of letter and spirit and his eucharistic theology to note similarities. Wesley’s emphasis on the means of grace, preaching among them, will be explained.

- **Mini-Lecture: “Adding the Word: The Sacrament(al)s as a Model for Preaching”**
  - A definition of the sacramental impulse as the Church’s way of binding the community together around certain symbols will be offered. Insights from the six themes in chapter five of this thesis will be offered.

- **Assignment for next class:**
  - List three possibilities for action in the community of your preaching that the grace in your chosen text might empower. Explain why. Choose one. Begin thinking about how that action might be symbolized in an act of worship.

**Appropriation: Participating in the Gospel with the Body (of Christ)**

**Week Six: Appropriation, Both as Preaching and as the Aim of Preaching**

- **Read for this class**

- **Mini-Lecture: “Preaching as Appropriation: The Sermon as a Model of Confession and Ethics”**
  - Preaching is an appropriation of the gospel and a performance of belief, an “e-vent” or “out-coming” of faith. In preaching one confesses the truth about oneself with the help of the Holy Spirit. Preaching is also a performance of the good and the ethical, again with the Spirit’s help. Also, liturgy is the congregation’s performance of their confession and ethics. The sermon is not something done for us. Rather, like other liturgical acts, the sermon is both an invitation to participation and simultaneously an empowering of that participation as a model, a coming-out as Christian in the “e-vent” of worship.
  - Discussion: Consideration of related Driver article.
Mini-Lecture: “Preaching as Appropriation: The Overturning of Powers”
  o Perhaps review videos of Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, or Teresa Fry Brown to examine how preaching can lead people to act and subvert ideologies.
  o Discussion of related Driver article and the Brueggemann reading.

Written assignment for next session
  o Write a single page (250-300 words) on how the themes of your four pages connects with the sacrament(al)s of your tradition.
  o Complete pages three and four, considering the readings for the next class session.

Week Seven: Appropriation as Participation in Preaching

Read for this class
  o Wilson, Setting Words on Fire, Sections 3, 5, and 6 on genres of proclamation and their effects
  o Lose, Crossroads, Chapter 6, “Preaching and Christian Identity”
  o Lose, Crossroads, Chapter 5, “Ministry and Preaching in the Age of Digital Pluralism
  o Several of Lose’s sermon commentaries from www.workingpreacher.com and http://www.davidlose.net/ (“...in the meantime”).

Mini-Lecture: “Emerging Bodies: Appropriation at the Cutting Edge of Christian Community”
  • This lecture will focus on research into the importance of embodied practice in the Emerging Christian Movement (ECM). Why do millennials want to be engaged with more than the mind and go deeper into practice?
  • Class discussion of Lose, chapter six and the participatory sermon. Review of some of the commentaries for examples

Class Workshop in small groups: Devise ways that the congregation can participate in the grace of your sermon on the liturgical level, the confessional level, and/or the ethical level.
  o Liturgical – What can these empowered people do in this service to symbolize their participation in God’s action?
  o Confessional – What can these empowered people say/write/photograph/record/perform either in the liturgy or beyond that can give voice to their faith in God’s grace in the the sermon?
  o Ethical – What can these empowered people say or do to reflect the goodness of God as a result of this sermon?

Move back and forth from discussion on small group level and class level

Written assignment for next class:
  o Write opening acts of worship around congregational need, closing acts of worship around empowered mission, note liturgical connections with sacraments (if observed in your tradition). Write out your clear plan for participation in the sermon.
Week Eight: Responsible Use of Social Media in Preaching and Worship
[We do not really have anything to support the teaching of this area yet, but the writing of the course outline convinces us that this will be an important part of the class or at least the readings for the class.]

Weeks Nine through Twelve: Class Preaching of 10-minute sermons along with accompanying participatory elements. Instrument for evaluation and feedback to be devised.

IV. Conclusions

This thesis has attempted to show, first of all, that the origin of God’s Word is divine speech and action and, consequently, that the aim of God’s Word is transformed human capability that occurs, not by compulsion, but by cooperation. The second objective of this thesis, derivative of the first, has been to reveal a greater sense of harmony between ministries of Word and sacrament. Both require speech to interpret them and to name the biblical, triune God into them, and both should empower and invite embodied response in several forms: confession, liturgy/ritual, and ethics.

We began with the assertion that God’s Word descends into human life via the biblical texts and preaching. We then discovered that God’s Word seems weak like water but is actually powerful, refers to the past but is aimed toward the future, and is God-initiated but hearer-fulfilled. These themes are also evident in the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur who describes the process whereby human action is empowered by narratives. People hear narratives, enter into a mode of suspension whereby they play with various possibilities for future action, and then appropriate one or more of them (or not) as their future course. We also saw how the theologies of the reformers, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, collaborate to display a distinct unity of grace between speech and deed, between Word and Sacrament. We understood that God’s prevenient and justifying grace poured out through God’s Word in
many forms has the aim of human sanctification, holiness of heart and life. We considered the notion of the sermon as sacramental and followed several key themes through the homiletical literature since the advent of the New Homiletic.

Lastly, we have suggested here several strategies toward preaching as appropriation and a course outline which conforms to the theory of this thesis. We wish that we could be more full-throated with our program rather than merely suggestive. However, the reader has been patient enough, and for this we are most grateful. We do, however, look forward to continued research and writing, following several itineraries in this thesis. Primarily, we would like to consider more concrete ideas and strategies for helping hearers and preachers alike to participate in preaching, to appropriate the gospel as God empowers them to do so. We are also very interested in how preachers can provide feedback loops, methods where congregants can witness back to the preacher and congregation just how their appropriations of sermons have taken place and what they have meant.

We would also like to follow the connection between preaching and worship as a deeper partnership in church life and in seminary education. Preaching is a ritual act of the liturgy. Liturgy is the Word of God enacted in the community. We are confounded by the chasm of thought, pedagogy, and local practice that our disciplines maintain, and we believe that, while there are skills appropriate to each field that can be appreciated apart from the other, to maintain such thorough distance as now exists between homiletics and liturgics is harmful. This should begin in local churches as preachers, worship planners, and clergy and lay participants leave their silos and come to a common table of planning and preparation with the aim of thorough congregational participation via appropriation in the liturgy and in their lives.
We close now in hope that our insistence upon appropriation as the end of both preaching and worship (as well as its beginning) has not left the reader with the impression that we believe that the gospel is NOT being taken up, daily, by the Church and enacted with God’s help. For like rain comes the Word of God, and we thirst for it. God’s Word refreshes us and empowers us to preach, to lead, to serve, and to pray. And the rain pours in every land and in every city and in every church and in every life, not because we have made it happen with our strategies and planning, our poetry and our performance. But because God ultimately is free to rain where God will and become incarnate again in whom God will and breathe power and peace over any place God will. Appropriation happens when God’s spirit softens us to accept this loving offer without rebuke, when, like Mary the mother of Jesus, we let it be with us according to God’s Word. And God will receive with joy the fruit of God’s Word however we bring it in return. We merely write with hope that the appropriation of God’s good news about Jesus Christ will happen more, and more, and more.
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Appendix 1

Do You See What I See? A Sermon for Advent 3, Year A

Matthew 11:2-11
When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

In January 2007, the Washington Post decided to try a little social experiment that David Lose drew my attention to in a blog post with an apt title, “Do you see what I see?”¹

The Post stationed a busker, a violinist, in a busy subway station in Washington, DC in January to observe who would stop and listen to this music. [Play video from Post website in background] 1000+ people went by the player that day; most did not stop. A very few, six or seven, did stop, and I think he wound up with about $35 dollars for his hour’s worth of

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playing. Then there’s a moment of recognition by one of the bystanders. One of the people recognized who he was: “I saw you play at the Library of Congress.” Do you see what she saw?

This was no ordinary violinist. This was Joshua Bell, one of the world’s most highly decorated concert violinists. This was no ordinary violin. He was playing a multi-million dollar Stradivarius, one of the finest instruments ever crafted. Three days earlier he had filled Boston’s Symphony Hall with people paying $100 per seat. The question the Post author and many others since have asked is simple: Have we been trained to recognize beauty outside the contexts we expect to encounter beauty? Or, as Lose put it, “can we recognize great music anywhere outside of a concert hall?”

No one expects Joshua Bell in a Metro station.

(Page One) This isn’t a very Christmasy text today, is it? No stories about Mary and Joseph; no angels or wise men. Not even a prophecy about special babies. And we do love babies! But, is there ever a message here that can help Christmas become so much more than what we have made of it. In the words of the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his…”

God is at work beyond where we would expect. Certainly beyond John’s expectations! John just isn’t seeing IT in Jesus. Oh sure, John was full of ideas about who the Messiah would be! Remember last week when we heard John tell the repentant people of Jerusalem some things he was dead-set sure about:

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

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No, really, John! Don’t mince words. Tell us what you really think! I wonder what John was thinking about four verses later, when Jesus comes to be baptized by him and something other than a fire-breathing dragon comes down from heaven and rests on Jesus. A dove!

But by Chapter 11, John has lost his baptizing license. Apparently, his fiery rhetoric landed him in prison. But even from prison, he’s been following Jesus’ ministry like a super-fan following their football team. And the verdict? Not impressed! And so he sends some reporters to ask the question that every fan asks of the coach during a tough season, “Are thou he that is to come? Or shall we look for another?” Because, Jesus, I’m looking for something that you’re not doing. I don’t want dove-style Messiah! I’m expecting winnowing forks, threshing floors and burning chaff with unquenchable fire! I want to see some explosive energy off of the line of scrimmage.

Jesus answered them,

"Go and tell John what you hear and see:

Do you see what I see?

the blind receive their sight,

the lame walk,

the lepers are cleansed,

the deaf hear,

the dead are raised,

and the poor have good news brought to them."

Which sounds like John didn’t know all this. But Lose asks, and it got me to thinking, what if he did know? What if John did know all that Jesus was doing, and it still seemed, to
John, kind of ordinary, too ordinary to conclude that, yep, this guy is the one; this is the virtuoso; this is the coach for winning season (or the winnowing season that I’d really like to see).

So Jesus’ final answer? “And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

“Well, no offense, Jesus,” John might offer, “but I can’t really see it.”

(Page Two) Does anyone but me find some deep comfort in the fact that John the Baptist, the one who was looking for the Messiah like no other, one who baptized him and saw him and touched him, right up close, even John the Baptist was like, “Really?” You know what John needed, I think? John needed a nimbus. You know a nimbus when you see one, though you might not know that THAT is the word for it. A nimbus is that golden disk-looking thing behind the heads of important figures in religious art. [Show an example] It’s sort of the religious equivalent of the Staples easy button. When you’re looking at a landscape of people in religious art, and you’re trying to pick out Jesus or Mary or some saint you just look for the nimbus, or the halo, right? [Point to one] Nimbus! That was easy! If John or his messenger had only been able to see the nimbus!

John to disciple: “Did you deliver my message? Is he the Messiah?”

Messenger to John: “Oh, yeah! He totally has a nimbus! Now we KNOW he is the The One!”

But that’s not the way it works. Nimbuses won’t arrive to Christian art for a few centuries actually. A nimbus or a halo isn’t a supernatural thing that actually surrounds holy people or God experiences. A nimbus doesn’t occur on people in nature. A nimbus is what
we put on ordinary people when we experience God at work in them. We artists, when we paint the story of our lives, WE apply the nimbus.

Joshua Bell? No one recognized it. No one could see it. But then after someone showed it to me? Bing! It was as if I could see the nimbus! A saint of a player outside his usual concert confines.

But somehow along the way the church has trained us to see holy people and holy things in just about one and only one place: The church. Our temples, our holy Jerusalems, are kind of another easy button. We look for God in the Jerusalems of our lives, in our stained-glass capitals. The evidence of the Messiah, of God, is so much easier to find in the grand temple where we have placed halos around everything and set them in a shrine made of brick and mortar. This is the place of our Messiah, our holy of holies. We retreat here every so often from a world that we often think is Messiah-less and that offers little evidence of God’s presence much less God’s actions, a world where it seems no dead are raised and the poor are ever with us.

Frankly, I would like to see a little more fire, please God. I need some nimbuses in my line of sight, in my 21st century landscape. I’d like to see God at work in some places other than the ones where I am supposed to God, wouldn’t you? Even more frankly, I need to. Someone here today spent some time in an MRI tube this week and heard that infernal banging that it makes, longing for that knocking to come from God’s firm fist as if to say, “Here I am and I am at work, healing what is lame.” I wonder whether someone here, when you got to work this week, opened that note your spouse left in your planner, expecting a healing word after that big fight. But there it is, their handwriting in black and white, “divorce.” Is there one who is to come, to come for me? You have every right to ask. Is there
one, God, someone who will be more than simply present for me? Someone who is healing
wounds. Someone who is bringing good news. Someone out here in the real world, where the
glass is all too clear, and God is simply unexpected.

(Page Three) Sure seems hard for John to believe and for us, too. But God is at work
in the places you least expect. The Messiah did not first come to Jerusalem (where everyone
would have expected a king to be born), but to Bethlehem, a peasant village out in the work-
a-day world. We would be exercising common vision to look at any child born in such a
place and say, “Really? I mean, no offense or anything, but are you the one we are looking
for, or shall we look for another?” God’s prophet didn’t appear in a soft camelhair sportcoat
and a Windsor knot. John wore a hairshirt and Carhartts [tough workpants popular in the
south] and you could find him down on that creek in the woods. “What did you go out there
to see,” said Jesus, “A fine preacher in soft robes who leans this way and that, pushed by the
prevailing cultural winds? Jesus could see John for what he was, God’s prophet. Common
sense would have viewed Canaanite women as beyond God’s presence and practice. And yet
one of them saw Jesus for who he was. And he saw her for who she was. One nimbus
looking at another! And she asked for and received God’s work in her family.

When we look in the faces of people that we feed and clothe, that we visit and care
for, do we ever, in our right minds, even imagine asking, “Are you the One?” Never would
we expect it. And yet Jesus can see them. Jesus can see the nimbus behind every one of their
unexpected heads! “Just as surely as you gave grace to one of the least of these hungry or in
prison you did it for me.” Really? Are you for real, Jesus?” Once upon a time, we may have
exercised excellent judgment to look in the face of the dead man fresh off of a Roman torture
device being wrapped in a shroud and say, “Really? The Messiah? I don’t think so.” But now
we know that God was there, outside the city, rejected and despised. The centurion who saw
him die? He was the first to ask, “Do you see what I see?”

(Page Four) Because we are stewards of these stories, because they give us the marks
that we can look for in our own lives, then we can know that God is at work in our places of
work; we can know that God is at work between the walls that capture our pained cries and
our suffering silences; we know that God is at work in the profane places as well as in the
sacred spaces. But the sacred spaces help us to see them, to see the nimbuses behind the
heads of the saints in our lives!

So what if instead of training ourselves to find God in church, what if Church was
about helping you find God in the rest of our ordinary lives. We have stained glass nimbuses
here so that we can see them out there and we can name them with our lips, “God is at work
in you. I can see it! Do you see what I see?” We sing in here so that you can hear the faint
refrains of God at work when you are eating at Celadon House [a local restaurant]. We pray
in here so that we can know how to pray when we watch the NBC Nightly News. Can you
imagine finding God at work at work, at home, when you are shopping, when you are
working out? God is at work in the medical suites and corporate offices; God is at work in
churches and in subway stations. It may seem hard to believe at times, but what did you go
out into the world to see? Just an MRI machine knocking, knocking, knocking? Or was every
knock a sign of the Holy at work? Was it just a licensed marriage and family therapist who
welcomed you into her office? Who listened and listened and asked the hard question and
c caught your tears in the bottle of her expertise and sent you forth with a bit more hope that
you had 50 minutes before? Was it just that? Or might the face of our Christ be peeking at us through these people and in these places? Do you see what I see?

Yes? Then if you see it, you can name it! You can name God into the office, the grocery, cancer ward. You can name God into your home room, your dorm room, or your assisted living room. With God’s wise insight, that you can gain here in church, you can look into the wild, seemingly untamable places of your life and be confident that God is there as well.

Here is a nimbus. [hold up a large gold charger behind your head] Actually, it’s a charger from my dining table, but it makes a good substitute! I don’t have enough for everyone here today, but we might keep this going for a few weeks. I invite you take a portable nimbus with you today and use it to name God into your workaday world. With God’s help you can see the holy in people and places that you’d never expect. If Jesus can be the Messiah of God, then we can be sure that God waits for us in whatever Bethlehem we have to go to tomorrow morning. There, in that place, you can imagine God both meeting you and using you in your many roles as employee, parent, spouse, friend, citizen, and volunteer, to extend God's love and blessing to an often faithless world. I invite you, in short, to hear and see God at work outside of the church, but then bring your witness back to the church. Place the nimbus behind people or in situations or places where you see the Holy One at work and then take a digital picture of it. Please send the pics to me at email@church.com or tweet them with the hashtag #doyouseewhatIsee along with a description of your insight. If you will permit us, we will share the photos on our website and in worship over the coming weeks. Please bring the charger back next week to share with another!
I look forward to seeing you discover that which is holy in the midst of the places that you once thought profane. God is at work in the places we least expect.

For “Christ plays in 10,000 places, lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his.”

God has made it possible for us to sidle up next to a faithless world and ask Do you see what I see?

Look at the busker Do you see what I see?

Look at the senior vice-president of operations! Do you see what I see?

Look at the IV bag. Look at the therapist. Look at these friends.

Look at you!

Do you see what I see?