

Conversation and Proclamation: Resources and Issues

By John S. McClure

Homiletics is an interdisciplinary field of study. Changes in homiletics derive largely from changes in philosophy, theology, biblical studies, Christian ethics, rhetoric, and the human sciences. Just as it is possible to observe significant changes in these cognate disciplines in recent years, so it is possible to see the impact of these changes on the theology, theory and practice of Christian proclamation. This essay highlights several significant changes that are influencing homiletics today and makes suggestions that might move us along at least one new direction in coming years.

The theme that I have chosen to unify this particular change is "conversation." The word conversation (or its more purified and reified counterpart "dialogue") shows up in various permutations in many current works in all of the disciplines mentioned above. In an age of theological pluralism, in which themes of "contextuality," "otherness," "relationality," "perspectivalism," "solidarity," and "community" are increasingly significant, *conversation*, or the give-and-take of face-to-face interaction between those who, by definition are *different*, has become an important cross-disciplinary category.

In homiletics, a revival of interest in the term "conversation" is likely to be predicated on the arrival of a new generation of ministers in many mainstream pulpits who have quit yearning nostalgically for either transcendental or foundational truths to preach. At the same time, they have grown weary of the radical subjectivities of Bergson and Bultmann (the "truth of faith" option). For better or worse, they have adopted a perspectival worldview and subscribe to a kind of epistemological pragmatism. For them, the truth of the gospel is, in the first place, paradigm/community/context-dependent. It can only be known by discussing, living, and practicing the Christian faith within a particular tradition, in a particular place, at a particular time.

Many of these ministers are also aware that their perspectival and communal truths must be tested and informed through interaction with those who stand within other perspectives, traditions and situations. This will insure that their communal practice does not become parochial or sectarian, and will further the kind of open and inclusive relationship with strangers and neighbors that is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ.² Ultimately, therefore, the gospel message, for many today, is something that is continually *emerging* within a multi-perspectival dialogue. Thus, the metaphor of preaching as conversation *within* and *across* lifeworlds,³ is at least one appropriate way to envision the ministry of proclamation as we move toward the 21st century.

But how are we to understand homiletical conversation? What are the appropriate philosophical and theological presuppositions to undergird our conceptions of conversation? Who should be the par-

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ticipants in homiletical conversations? To what extent can we include people in theory and not in fact? (i.e., can we presume that we can identify with folk as a way of including them in our homiletical conversations?) What will be the style and form of our conversations: interpersonal, argumentative, collaborative? What are our goals: deeper relationality and community? renewed baptismal identity? consensus on matters of importance? solidarity in spite of difference? What does the rhetoric of conversation sound like when it is transposed into pulpit speech? These are just a few of the questions that homileticians must answer as they consider conversation as an undergirding model for proclamation. In this essay, I venture a few answers of my own, and raise a few questions for further consideration.

Philosophy, Theology, Ethics, and Preaching

Several resources and issues from the disciplines of philosophy, theology, and ethics are important if we are to consider preaching as conversation.

The "Unlimited Conversation"

Jurgen Habermas' philosophy of communicative action is built on a revised enlightenment notion of conversation.⁴ Following American pragmatist C.S. Pierce, Habermas asserts that consensus is the only pathway to truth.⁵ He uses the concept of "unlimited conversation" as the only way to measure what is acceptable as "true" in today's world. His is, perhaps, the most radical of the so-called "congruence" theories of truth.⁶

Helmut Peukert has pointed out that Habermas' "unlimited conversation," when considered theologically, must be revised to include the communion of saints - both past and future.⁷ It is not enough to listen only to the input of those who bring contemporary interests to our conversations. The suffering of those who have preceded us and the history of hope in which the world is enmeshed must be taken into account. According to Peukert, our conversations should be both anamnestic and eschatological.⁸

Another level on which to consider the idea of "unlimited" conversation takes into account Christian participation in conversations across sub-cultures and cultures. David Tracy, William Placher, and George Lindbeck have struggled for years to identify models and norms for such conversations.⁹ At the same time, "public theologians," such as Ronald Thieman, Parker Palmer and Victor Anderson¹⁰ have worked to identify ways that preaching can cross the boundaries that usually separate the "private" and the "public" domains of everyday life. If we take seriously the need for a more open or "unlimited" conversation, then we must consider ways that preaching can engage other religions and other subcultures in which the church is inextricably embedded.

Within a conversational homiletic, therefore, it is likely that preaching (or one of its aspects: exegesis, sermon-brainstorming, sermon preparation, etc.) will be removed from the pastor's study and placed at the sanctuary door (and perhaps beyond). Preachers will find actual, practical ways to move beyond the narrow circle of conversation partners that make up the usual center of congregational and denominational

life-bringing themselves into conversation with "strangers" within and beyond the church walls. For instance, this might mean holding pre-sermon brainstorming sessions in public places (at the mall, public library, school, etc.) or including marginal or marginalized persons as regular conversation partners in sermon preparation.¹¹

Significant issues remain for homileticians and preachers who are interested in broadening the circle of homiletical conversation. How is it possible, in the face of the demands already placed on ministers, to expand the conversation toward Christian truth to include "unlimited" conversation partners (actual and potential)? How, other than honoring Scripture and tradition, can we best include conversation partners past and future (Holocaust victims, for instance, or the deported children of Haitian immigrants)? How do we insure that the texts and traditions of the church are significant (but not exclusive) conversation partners?¹² What other texts ("classics" as David Tracy calls them) and traditions should become conversation partners, and how best do we include them in our homiletical conversations?

Theology of The Interhuman: "Otherness," and Conversation

In his book, *Good and Evil*, Edward Farley explicates the "interhuman" and the "other" as fundamental categories for Christian theological anthropology. He incorporates insights from Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, asserting the "givenness" of our "being with others" as an essential aspect of human reality and as "a condition apart from which recognition, empathy, dialogue, and relation could never occur."¹³

Farley goes on, however, to say that the interhuman is an arena that cannot be idealized. It is "tragic" and laden with moral ambiguity. It is "a problematic condition."¹⁴ This is because "at the heart of the interhuman is a vast set of incompatibilities that originate in the irreducible otherness of the participants."¹⁵

Farley's concept of the interhuman challenges us to develop a view of conversation that is at once "tragic" and ethical.¹⁶ Tragically, conversation is never free from "benign alienation."¹⁷ Although we can work hard to incorporate rules of genuine dialogue into our conversations, and to expand the circle of conversation to make it more inclusive, conversations are always filled with "misunderstandings, resentments," and other "benign antipathies."¹⁸ Among other things, this means that we must be wary of becoming overly sentimental or naively optimistic about our "conversations." On the one hand, we will have to qualify our motives and goals when we put together rational programs for dialogue in which absolute mutuality, truthfulness, rightness, correspondence and comprehensibility are supposed to prevail.¹⁹ On the other hand, we will have to forsake the "ideology of intimacy,"²⁰ so common to American culture. Both of these foist upon us the idea that the purpose of conversation is to somehow *overcome* otherness and the benign alienation that accompanies it. We cannot assume that we will ever achieve a perfectly rational discourse situation that will not be infected by some form of alienation, or that asymmetry can be dissolved by some kind of consensual intimacy. We can decide beforehand, therefore, to

recognize that asymmetry and otherness are (tragically) fundamental to human conversation.

For homiletical theorists, this will mean that ideals such as symmetry (cf. Gadamer's "fusion of horizons") and identification (cf. Craddock and Burke), the backbones of the "new homiletic," will have to be re-examined and re-configured.²¹ Liberation and Black theologians remind us that assumptions that one can move beyond compassion or empathy to the point of *identifying* with others can become dangerous and disempowering. Notions of interchangeability, symmetry, or a "generalized other,"²² must be carefully managed within a conversational homiletic.

Ethically, we need to consider how to keep benign alienation from becoming malignant in our conversations: i.e., how to keep others from becoming either narcissistic self-projections or instrumental objects of power and self-interest. Participants need to be reminded of their own irreducible differences, and encouraged to translate the experience of otherness into "a call to commitment and responsibility" ("compassionate obligation") rather than into "negotiations of self-interest and power."²³ In matters of interpretation, partners need to manifest a hermeneutic of generosity, rather than an over-riding hermeneutic of suspicion in relation to others. Conversations should include rituals of empowerment so that all can gain a verbal and material footing. Participants should decide on proximate, rather than ultimate goals for their conversations. Conversations should include feedback to provide accountability and continuity. Etc.

Feminist Theological Ethics: Conversation Toward Universal Solidarity

Sharon Welch's work raises further issues for an ethic of conversation. According to Welch, Habermas' communicative goal of rational consensus is incommensurate with a Christian ethic rooted in love and justice. Similar to many liberation ethicists, Welch argues that "consensus is a continuation of the dream of domination."²⁴ In her book, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Welch abandons the cognitive and epistemological level of communication for the relational and ethical. The goal for conversation, according to Welch, (echoing Levinas' "coming to terms"²⁵) is "universal solidarity." Solidarity is less a quality of ideas and more a quality of relationships. According to Welch, solidarity is the "material basis" for communication. It is not enough simply to extend conversations to include the voices of women and other heretofore marginalized persons, assuming that a "universal and unconstrained consensus" can be reached between all parties. More important is to allow a substantive "mutual critique" to exist in which the concrete, substantive proposals of each party contribute to the promise of a "universal solidarity of human beings."²⁶ According to Welch, "solidarity does not require self-sacrifice but an enlargement of the self to include community with others."²⁷ As Stephen Crowell puts it, "Dialogue is neither a fusion of horizons (Gadamer) nor a site of endless deferrals (Derrida), but the creation of commonplaces governed by justice, or the giving-welcoming of the Other as stranger... (Levinas, Welch)."²⁸ (parentheses mine)

Welch's work challenges preachers to consider how to move

themselves and well-meaning congregations beyond the goal of consensus, especially in conversations that take place across very different lifeworlds (gay and straight, for instance). At least three issues emerge: 1) How do homiletical conversations gain a "material basis" that is relational, social and ethical, and not merely cognitive? For instance, I have found in my work with collaborative preachers that when laity are included in sermon brainstorming the real issues and concerns within the congregation (*cognitive issues shaping the material basis of our common life*) are likely to be discussed and dealt with from the pulpit. It is difficult, however, to move sermon groups beyond interpretive positioning and posturing with regard to these cognitive issues toward what Levinas calls "coming to terms," i.e., making proposals for action that hold together often contradictory premises and perspectives. 2) How does conversational preaching move beyond sacrificing someone else's perspective or becoming self-sacrificing (lukewarm) so that it might express "an enlargement of vision to include community with others?" If solidarity subsumes or precludes relative agreement, how does one avoid sounding (and being) patronizing? (Loving the sinner, but not the sin, etc.) 3) No matter how rhetorically subtle we are, how does all of this (in the pulpit) avoid sounding like liberal tolerance taken to the limits, i.e., "to each his/her own way of thinking?" These are group-process and rhetorical considerations that will require a great deal of refinement if "coming to terms" with others and "solidarity" are taken to be significant goals for Christian proclamation.

Process Theology: Conversation and the Emergent Word

In the book *Biblical Preaching on the Death of Jesus*,²⁹ John Cobb, et. al. developed an incipient process-relational theology of the Word. Ron Allen and Clark Williamson furthered this enterprise with *A Credible and Timely Word: Process Theology and Preaching*.³⁰ According to these writers, the Word of God is not an ontological category, it is a relational reality. It is not static, essential, and conclusive; it is dynamic, emergent, and disclosive.

One of the most significant insights of process theologians is the recognition that the Word is closely related to the communal *reality* it seeks to provoke. As the situation changes in response to the transformative Word, a new Word becomes possible, moving hearers into deeper forms of life as the community of the Word.

This process-relational perspective on preaching is very suggestive when attached to a view of preaching as embedded in an ongoing congregational, ecclesial, and public conversation. The Word of God arrives, not as a decisive judgment or as a personal insight, but as an emergent communal reality. Hearers discern God's Word as a new reality in the community that is emerging piece by piece through the give-and-take of an open, ongoing, homiletical conversation. The Word is a significant communal hunch (what Marjorie Suchocki calls "the whispered word")³¹ that provokes open-ended thought, reflection, and experimentation.

I take this to be a call to relate preaching to congregational leadership — to the realities of transforming the "reality" of congregational

life into a closer approximation of God's Reign. It is also possible to relate this theology of the Word to other interests afoot in homiletics today, for instance, the relationship between preaching and the formation of congregations as "cultures,"³² or performative language approaches to homiletics.³³ In any case, process-relational theologies invite us to relate preaching to *actual situations* that exist in the community of faith and in the culture, to discern a Word that emerges from within these situations, and that has persuasive and visionary power to change or deepen these situations.

Conversation and Roundtable Ecclesiology

In her book *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*,³⁴ Letty Russell introduced the model of "Church in the Round" into ecclesiological parlance. Implicit in a conversational homiletic is something like Russell's roundtable ecclesiology. Russell's work helps us to see how a conversational homiletic implies significant revisions of our prevailing views of ordination (to Word), church hierarchy, and ecclesiastical power. Sovereign (oracular) views of ordination to Word and Sacrament, in which the preacher primarily represents God before the community, are less helpful for Russell than servant or partner models of ministry in which the preacher represents the people before God. At the same time, fixed ecclesiastical hierarchy gives way in her model to provisional or "temporary inequality"³⁵ — a form of provisional hierarchy that flows back and forth (reciprocating authority). Russell's ecclesiology demonstrates a theological anthropology similar, in some ways, to Farley's. She does not presume naively that inequalities such as those "between teacher and student, parent and child, chairperson and member," can, or should be jettisoned in favor of a flat equivalence.³⁶ She is concerned, however, that these inequalities do not atrophy into fixed forms of hierarchy of status or role. The benign alienation of otherness, manifested in differing gifts and talents, should not be allowed to harden into the malignant alienation of status, gnosis, and privilege. Therefore, she levels and limits hierarchy to temporary, always shifting asymmetries of knowledge, expertise or experience that are managed within empowering protocols of community interaction. Authority is bestowed upon communication partners at different times and for different reasons. Ecclesiastical power does not move from the top down. It exists as the exertion of interactive influence within a web of conversations that constitutes organizational life.

Conversation as a metaphor for preaching implies an ecclesiology similar to Russell's, with all of its accompanying problems. It challenges and reconstrues traditional notions of ordination, church order and power. Thus one can expect, when adopting this approach, to be constantly asked such questions as: "Weren't we ordained to tell folks what to think and do?" "What is preaching for anyway?" "What about your 'prophetic' calling?" etc. The most difficult practical problem with a shift to a roundtable ecclesiology is the problem of residual expectations of sovereign and fixed hierarchical roles and status. These expectations are rooted in traditional, symbolic, cultural and congregational norms. It is likely that, at least initially, only hybrid forms of this ecclesiology will

be feasible.

Here, again, further study and research needs to be done. This much can be said. Clearly, ministerial identity, role, and expertise do not dissolve when realistic views of community and conversation are employed that take into account asymmetries of knowledge, expertise, role and experience. *How* and *when* ministerial authority is exercised is crucial. Ministerial power is expressed principally as power *with* and *for*. It is exercised with a watchful eye toward coercion and manipulation. It is *forthcoming*: manifested in an open and open-ended conversation, not sprung on people outside of, and exclusive of, such conversation. Ordination is not a status that is held in reserve in order to maintain independent rank in an ideal realm. It is kenotic—something poured out in favor of deepening conversation and community. For this reason, for instance, I tell collaborative preachers to be sure to say in pre-sermon roundtable conversations everything they want to say later in the pulpit — not to hold back anything "prophetic" or "over against" that they have on their mind.

The Bible and Preaching

There have been several current shifts in the fields of biblical exegesis and interpretation that suggest a conversational approach to biblical hermeneutics. Fernando Segovia, et. al. in *Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*³⁷ assert that reading the Bible is best done by "positioned readers, flesh-and-blood persons" who are in "critical dialogue" within a "truly global interaction" regarding the meaning of biblical texts. Daniel Patte in his recent book *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: a Reevaluation* argues for a conversation between levels of exegetical practice and for the inclusion of the "ordinary reader" in that conversation.³⁸ In his book entitled *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, Walter Bruggeman argues that "the practice of Christian interpretation in preaching and liturgy is contextual, local, and pluralistic." It is also "perspectival, not objectivistic."³⁹

Preachers coming out of seminaries today are aware that their social location and preferences regarding exegetical method have tremendous influence on how they interpret the Bible. They see clearly how social location and exegetical presuppositions "make meaning possible in the *production of meaning* in the text and in the *consumption of meaning* by the reader."⁴⁰ As practical and pastoral exegetes, they understand the Bible as more than a literary-historical artifact or an object of devotional reflection. In the words of Gale Yee, the Bible is "a persuasive force forming opinion, making judgments, and exerting change . . . a form of power acting upon the world."⁴¹

Because of this, it is likely that the next generation of preachers will be more open to acknowledging the limitations of their own readings of texts and more willing to explore how the conventions of hearing accompanying other social locations and exegetical practices might affect biblical interpretation. They will not be as eager to be in absolute control of the interpretation process. They will be more generous when confronted with "ordinary readings," and more concerned to use their critical expertise to demonstrate, enhance and undergird such readings,

rather than to disprove and discredit them. They will not be as quick to cry "heresy!" Rather, they will be ready to engage, and perhaps even to promote, readings that are marginal within their own communities of faith or that bring significant challenges from beyond the boundaries of the church. They will also be more likely to bring multiple levels of exegesis (literary, historical, reader response, etc.) into sustained conversation toward contextual pastoral decisions, instead of making pastoral interpretation subservient to one exegetical standard.

Cultural Studies, Cultural Anthropology, and The Human Sciences

There have been several significant shifts in cultural theory and in the human sciences that are affecting the move toward conversation in homiletics.

"Speaking For Others" and the Politics of Identity

Is it possible to speak for someone else? Can an African-American male be a feminist? Can a woman preacher speak for a gay man? Visibility, marginality, and authorized speech are disputed issues in feminist literature, studies of cultural identity, and literary criticism. Surveying this literature,⁴² it is evident that problems arise when a preacher presumes to speak *as* someone, *for* someone, or *from* a particular subject position. Solving these problems, however, is far trickier than one might expect. On the one hand, this literature illustrates the problems of extreme "retreat" positions (Trebilcot's for instance), in which speakers succumb to individualism by opting to qualify everything they say as "I only speak for myself." Such a position denies the reality that the self is "constituted by multiple intersecting discourses."⁴³ On the other hand, the assumption that disempowerment can be overcome simply by "listening to" others (Foucault, Deleuze) may only be a "self-abnegating intellectual" pose (Spivak) that "assumes that the oppressed can transparently represent their own true interests."⁴⁴ Should one opt, then, for a qualified "speaking for" in order to represent the voices of the marginalized in our congregations? This is an option many of us have exercised — including the use of ideas, illustrations, stories, etc. from other cultures or lifeworlds.

Alcoff suggests another possibility: that we "strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others."⁴⁵ This means that we must use whatever means of technology available to bring actual people (gays and straights? peoples of many colors? young and old? abused and non-abused? etc.) into real interaction *before* we "speak for" them, and that our moments of "speaking for" (the group) should be ensconced within an ongoing, expanding conversation in which feedback/forward is possible.

Semiotics, Cultural Anthropology, Popular Religion and Preaching as Local Theology

Reviewing the work of Robert Schreiter, James Hopewell, Alex Garcia-Rivera,⁴⁶ and homileticians influenced by semiotics and cultural anthropology,⁴⁷ it is evident that we have more to learn about the ways that preaching is rooted in and formative of congregational cultures.

Schreier encourages priests to "learn the ascesis of listening" through which one "follow(s) the direction of the speaker," and "move(s) more deeply into the speaker's reality."⁴⁸ Garcia-Rivera demonstrates how this ascesis provides access to the "little stories" of popular religion. These "little stories" of popular religion demonstrate how the "Big Story" carried by the official tradition is challenged, interpreted and made one's own.

Nora Tubbs Tisdale, in her book *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*⁴⁹ takes the insights of these "local theologians" very seriously. Preachers learn from cultural anthropologists to become participant-observers who read the signs and symbols that constitute congregational communication. This ethnographic skill involves more than general pastoral reflection, which is prone to distortion and stereotyping. Preachers learn a critical practice for "exegeting" congregations and determining local theology and worldview. As a part of this exegesis, they interview parishioners and listen to the significant talk that is forming congregational culture. They see their preaching as dynamically related to this talk — growing out of it and shaping it as a kind of folk art. They embed their preaching in the larger "webs of significance" that produce and shape congregational identity and worldview.

If semiotic and ethnographic skills can be readily learned and practiced, preachers will learn an "ascesis of listening" that will help them to appreciate and understand the unique, resident theologians in their congregations. They will discover how local theologies are, in actuality, ways in which the official traditions of the church are appropriated, transformed, and sometimes challenged. Ethnographic preachers will also be able to involve congregational history, ethos, style and worldview effectively in homiletical conversations.

Conversation Analysis (CA) and the Rhetoric of Interaction

What does the rhetoric of conversation sound like when it is transposed into pulpit speech? In order to determine this, we need to know, empirically, what conversational speech *is* and *sounds like*. The relatively new field of Conversation Analysis is extremely helpful in this endeavor.⁵⁰ Conversation analysts explore a whole set of linguistic markers and rhetorical cues that occur in conversations of various types. They also provide a critical, empirical assessment of conversation that helps us to understand the shifts of power and authority that are embedded within all conversational language.⁵¹

One important contribution of Conversation Analysis is the clear distinction between cooperative conversations (Wolfram Bublitz) and interpersonal conversations (Deborah Tannen). Central to cooperative conversations, for instance, are particular forms of topic-setting, interpreting, empowering, and decision-making. Cooperative conversations include many verbal and linguistic cues: announcements, summons, following, clarification, acknowledgement, repair, assessment, framing (including frame resistance and re-framing), empathic response, interruption, story-telling, proposal, projection, inspiration, sustaining, arranging, instructing, and offering. Any, or all, of these occur in ordinary collaborative conversations and can be re-tooled for pulpit speech.

Conversational homileticians will need to explore ways to organize

sermonic material conversationally and learn how to use oral language that is clearly conversational. They will need to discover how to take the dynamics of pre-sermon cooperative conversations and use these to shape the logic and language of sermons. In my opinion, Conversation Analysis is a valuable partner in this process.

Leadership Theory, Organizational Theory and Collaboration

In leadership theory, there has been a marked shift away from the assumption that autocratic leadership models or consultative leadership models are best in most or all leadership situations. Situational leadership studies show that, where long-term and high-investment leadership issues are at stake, collaborative approaches are best.⁵²

Part of this reassessment of leadership models is the result of current research in the field of organizational theory which demonstrates that organizations exist most fundamentally *in* and *as* conversation, or "talk."⁵³ In order for leaders to exert influence within their organizations, they must be "let in" on the key conversations that are taking place (an issue, largely, of trust) and exert influence within those conversations. They must also create core-conversations in which arbiters of many of these side-conversations can come together and work to establish significant goals and forms of practice for the whole organization. From a homiletical perspective, this core-conversation could be a pre-sermon homiletical conversation, or preaching itself, from the perspective of collaborative leadership.

Several questions accompany this perspective, however. Among them: What does one do with official, representative boards (sessions, church councils, vestries, etc.) if leadership functions are assumed by groups engaged in homiletical conversations? What does one do when situations occur in congregation or culture in which autocratic leadership is most appropriate? What does one do with the vestigial (and often pervasive) autocratic assumptions that surround the pulpit ministry?

Notes Toward a Conversational Homiletic

Let me now suggest a few emerging qualities of a "conversational homiletic":

Relational and Real

Preaching will grow dynamically out of a relational matrix. Preachers will move out of the relative professional and personal isolation of their pastors' studies, or clergy lectionary groups, into the broader relational matrix of congregation and culture for sermon brainstorming and preparation (and possibly delivery). This means that their messages will acquire a new kind of reality — what Welch calls a "material basis." This is not the same thing as "relevance." It is a deep transformative relatedness to the actual stuff of congregational and cultural life.

Perspectival and Plural

Preachers will acknowledge the perspectival quality of Christian truth and, rather than worrying themselves to death over "relativism,"

accept the challenge to identify clearly their own perspective, and place that perspective into serious, ongoing conversation within a plurality of perspectives.

Critical and Skilled

Preachers will adopt a critical (dare we say postmodern?) view of conversation that takes into account the otherness, benign alienation, and asymmetries of power, knowledge and experience that constitute human being-together. They will not fundamentally assume that they can identify with others. They will have a deep desire to ask others what they think and believe, and come to terms with this in the pulpit. At the same time, preachers will want to gain participant-observer skills beyond the level of general pastoral empathy in order to preach in a way that responds to the broader local theologies that shape congregational life.

Universal, Anamnestic and Eschatological

Preachers will work to develop models for homiletical practice that place local conversations within a larger, (qualifiedly) universal and "unlimited" conversation that is public, inter-religious, ecumenical, cross-cultural, global, anamnestic and eschatological. This will require them to include in their sermon preparation conversation(s) that include marginalized voices within the congregation and its tradition and conversations with persons and texts beyond the doors of the congregation that represent other lifeworlds, cultures and traditions.

Participative and Persuasive

Preachers will adopt an ecclesiological vision in which shared power and authority, provisional hierarchy (reciprocity, asymmetry) and interactive (non-coercive, non-manipulative, forthcoming) persuasion are standards for communicative ministry. The situation of preaching in such a context calls primarily, but not exclusively, for collaborative, rather than consultative or sovereign forms of leadership from the pulpit.

Endnotes

¹ The word conversation has a long and venerable history in homiletics. Earlier in our generation, it was the "dialogue" preachers of the sixties who attempted a modernist update of the term (Reuel Howe, Clyde Reid, and others). More recently, William E. Dorman and Ronald J. Allen make use of the term in "Preaching as Hospitality," *Quarterly Review* 14 (1994):295-310. Ron Allen returns to the concept in "Why Preach Prom Passages in the Bible?" in *Preaching as a Theological Task: World, Gospel, Scripture*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 180-182. I first used the word "conversation" in *The Four Codes of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) to describe one approach to meaning (semantics of reciprocity) in preaching. In *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), I used roundtable conversation as a basic theme throughout the book. In large part, this essay unpacks much of the theology and theory embedded in the footnotes of that book.

² See, for instance, William Placher's discussion of Christian reasons, biblical and theological, for such dialogue in *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 116-118. In *The Roundtable Pulpit* I argue that open and open-ended conversation was part of the practice of Christian proclamation in the first century house and tenement churches.

³ Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume II: Lifeworld and System: A Cri-*

tique of Functionalist Reason Trans Thomas McCarthy (Boston Beacon Press, 1987) The idea of "lifeworld" is directly parallel to Parker Palmer's idea of the "public" in *A Company of Strangers Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* A lifeworld is an arena of everyday, ordinary communication, a world of discourse where we negotiate and share common meanings and values Sometimes, lifeworlds are *places*, such as the church, the ball park, the shopping mall, or the neighborhood Lifeworlds can also be *public associations of common interest* such as the lifeworlds of the elderly, grunge-youth culture, the homeless, welfare recipients, or the middle class These lifeworlds are constituted by face-to-face interaction of many types, and are regulated and maintained by a mixture of informal conversation and deliberative decision-making

⁴ *The Theory of Communicative Action Volume I Reason and the Rationalization of Society* Trans Thomas McCarthy (Boston Beacon Press, 1984), *The Theory of Communicative Action Volume II Lifeworld and System A Critique of Functionalist Reason*

⁵ See Terrence W Tilley, "Toward a Theology of the Practice of Communicative Action," in Terrence W Tilley (ed), *Postmodern Theologies The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, NY Orbis Books, 1995), 10

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology Toward a Theology of Communicative Action* Trans James Bohman (Cambridge, Mass MIT Press, 1984) See also Don S Browning and Frances Schussler Fiorenza, *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology* (New York Crossroad, 1992)

⁸ Toward somewhat similar ends, Hans Georg Gadamer reminds us that it is necessary to include authority or tradition as a partner in our conversations (*Truth and Method* [2nd ed , New York Crossroad, 1989] 269)

⁹ See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York Crossroad, 1975), William C Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, George Lindbeck (ed), *Dialogue on the Way* (Minneapolis Augsburg, 1965), and *The Nature of Doctrine Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1984)

¹⁰ Ronald F Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York Crossroad, 1992), Victor Anderson, "The Search for a Public Theology in the United States," in *Preaching as a Theological Task World, Gospel, Scripture*

¹¹ I suggest one process for attempting this in "Collaborative Preaching From the Margins" (*Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 1996)

¹² Ronald Allen shows how a process of conversational biblical interpretation can help to solve the "Buttrick-Farley reservations concerning preaching on biblical passages" in "Why Preach From Passages in the Bible?" in *Preaching as a Theological Task World, Gospel, Scripture*, 176 In *The Roundtable Pulpit*, I include a process that is designed to make the Bible and the traditions of the church significant conversation partners in pre-sermon collaboration

¹³ (Minneapolis Portress Press, 1990), 40

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid* , 45

¹⁶ *Ibid* , 40

¹⁷ *Ibid* , 44 According to Farley, 'Malignant alienation is a corruption from the interhuman that arises in connection with the dynamics of evil Benign alienation is an intrinsic and tragic element of the interhuman "

¹⁸ *Ibid* , 45

¹⁹ These are some of the qualities of a "universal pragmatics" of speech outlined by Habermas in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston Beacon Press, 1979), 1-68

²⁰ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York Alfred A Knopf, 1977), 259

²¹ According to Steven Crowell, for Gadamer "dialogue is said to consist in the symmetrical movement toward a fusion of horizons between reciprocally self-effacing participants who 'risk inherited prejudices within a common interrogative orientation toward the truth

'Dialogue and Text Re-marking the Difference, in Tullio Maranhao (ed), *The Interpretation of Dialogue* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1990), 347 See also Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1969), xiv ff

²² Seyla Benhabib coined this term as part of her critique of liberal ethicists who fail to take into account the "individual and concrete identity of the other In Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1989), 127

²³ *Good and Evil* , 41

²⁴ *Feminist Ethic*, 132-133

²⁵ *Totality and Infinity* Trans Alphonso Lings (Pittsburgh Duquesne University Press, (1969)

²⁶ *Feminist Ethic*, 132.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Crowell, *Dialogue and Text*, 355.

²⁹ (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

³⁰ (St Louis: Chalice Press, 1991)

³¹ From an unpublished paper by that title, given at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

³² Nora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996)

³³ Pamela Moeller, *A Kinesthetic Homiletics: Embodying Gospel in Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

³⁴ (Louisville. Westminster/John Knox Press).

³⁵ *Growth in Partnership* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 36-37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 31.

³⁸ (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 76-84.

³⁹ (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 8-10.

⁴⁰ Gale Yee, "The Author/Text/Reader and Power: Suggestions for a Critical Framework for Biblical Studies," in *Reading From This Place*, 117.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴² See especially Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman, *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995), Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Joyce Trebilcot, "Dyke Methods," *Hypatia* 3, no.2 (1988): 1-13; Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed Donald Bouchard Trans Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁴³ Linda Alcoff, "Speaking for Others," in Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman, *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*, 109

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 111

⁴⁶ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1986); James Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1987), Alex Garcia-Rivera, *St. Martin de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1995)

⁴⁷ Nora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*; John McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies*

⁴⁸ *Constructing Local Theologies*, 50.

⁴⁹ (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1996).

⁵⁰ See, in particular, Wolfram Bublitz, *Supportive Fellow-Speakers and Cooperative Conversations* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1988); Graham Button and John R.E. Lee, *Talk and Social Organization* (Philadelphia Multilingual Matters, 1987); Michael Moerman, *Talking Culture: Ethnology and Conversation Analysis* (Philadelphia. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), Deborah Tannen, *That's Not What I Meant! How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987).

⁵¹ See, for instance, Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse* (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1994) and Ivana Markova and Klaus Foppa (eds.), *Asymmetries in Dialogue* (Savage, Md : Barnes and Noble Books, 1991).

⁵² See Carl F. Graumann, and Serge Moscovici (eds), *Changing Conceptions of Leadership* (New York Springer-Verlag, 1986); Barbara Kellerman (ed), *Leadership Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984); Mary Ellen Stortz, *PastorPower* (Nashville. Abingdon Press, 1993), David W Johnson and Frank P Johnson, *Joining Together Group Theory and Group Skills* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ Prentice-Hall, 1991).

⁵³ See, for instance, Edgar H Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992)