

## PREACHING AND LANGUAGE: RETHINKING THE POWER OF THE WORD

From the early Christian era until the contemporary period the church has claimed consistently that the Word of God proclaimed in the Christian community has the power to effect conversion. The CTSA workshop on preaching and language led by Mary Catherine Hilkert and Patricia A. Parachini was designed to explore the meaning of that claim from a contemporary systematic perspective. Paul Ricoeur's article "Naming God" (*Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 [1979] 215-27) was recommended background reading.

In the major presentation of the workshop, Hilkert noted that the theology of preaching proposed in contemporary homiletic literature relies heavily on a biblical theology of the power of the word but frequently fails to address systematically the contemporary meaning of such expressions as "God speaks," "God acts," or "the Word of God is living and active." The Word-event theology of G. Ebeling, E. Fuchs, and the post-Bultmannians represents a significant attempt to carry the discussion further by drawing on the philosophical resources of the later Heidegger and Gadamer in order to describe the impact of the proclaimed word in terms of a language event in which reality seeks to come to expression (or God is made manifest) through word. Like Ricoeur, the new hermeneutic theologians coming from the Reformed tradition emphasize that the Word of God addresses its hearers, calls all human presuppositions into question, heals deafness, and enables believers to speak and live authentically.

From a Catholic perspective Hilkert expressed reservations, however, about this approach to the power of the word in terms of the underlying anthropology with its emphasis on sinful humanity, the dialectical theology of revelation ("grace is never something human beings can have at all"; the wholly-other God seizes the believer in the event of proclamation), and the passivity of both preacher and community in the preaching event.

Karl Rahner's approach to the word as sacrament or symbol was suggested as an alternative position from the Catholic tradition which incorporates the rich insights of the later Heidegger into a more positive anthropology and a sacramental theology of revelation and grace. Further development of Rahner's theology of word as sacrament along the line of the linguistic analysts' notion of performative utterances as discussed by J. Ladrrière could contribute significantly to contemporary discussions of the power of the proclaimed word.

Alluding to her own proposal of a theology of proclamation from a Catholic perspective as "naming grace" found at the depths and limits of human existence, Hilkert noted the limitations of this incarnational-sacramental approach to the mystery of preaching: the lack of emphasis on the discontinuity between gospel

proclamation and human experience which would appear to minimize the power of preaching to convert the hearers of the word.

Attempting to identify more clearly the source of the metanoia which the gospel proclamation demands and promises, Hilkert pointed to the need for further reflection on four aspects of the preaching event: the referent of all preaching (the reign of God); the medium (religious language); the liturgical context (including frame of reference, speaker and hearers); and the role of the Holy Spirit.

Drawing attention to Ricoeur's discussion of "the world in front of the text," Hilkert suggested that the power of preaching to transform human existence is rooted in the mystery to which all preaching refers—the reign of God which remains a promised future not yet realized in human history or experience. The announcement of the reign of God opens up radically new possibilities which appear to be discontinuous from the present and past. Only from a later perspective can the new moment of conversion be interpreted as part of a tradition of living fidelity.

Second, Hilkert observed that the way all religious language functions offers another clue to the transforming power of the word in preaching. Whenever human beings attempt to speak about God or the reign of God, the words are "more unlike than like" the mystery they try to express, name, or evoke. Whether explained in terms of Thomistic analogy or more contemporary theories of religious language as symbol, limit expression, or metaphor, the discontinuous moment is an essential part of the way in which religious language operates. Both Ricoeur's treatment of parable as a summary of how religious language functions and his attention to forms of discourse (and the intermingling of forms) as revelatory suggest further avenues for discussion on the power of the proclaimed word. Noting the frequent references in contemporary homiletic literature to preaching as storytelling, Hilkert also called for further exploration of the critical-practical effect of narrative in relation to the question of the power of preaching to effect conversion.

Turning next to proclamation in the explicitly liturgical context, she remarked that since the homily itself is an act of worship, reflection on how liturgical language functions also expands the basis for the claim that the proclamation of the word is transformative. Further, the liturgical context suggests dimensions of the role of the community in the preaching event which are too often ignored. The preacher's words are a proclamation of the faith of the community. While Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of faith-hearing ("I assume this speaking is meaningful . . . the texts are held open by my desire to listen"), a Catholic perspective could develop further the active role of the community of believers in the liturgical event. The specific role of the homilist in the preaching event might be developed creatively in terms of Rahner's theology of witness or Ricoeur's writings on testimony.

Next the neglected areas of pneumatology and trinitarian theology were highlighted as important theological resources for reflection on the connection between preaching and conversion. Rethinking the role of the Holy Spirit in the preaching event would require further development of the concept of inspiration and the claim that the scriptures are uniquely the Word of God, exploration of the meaning of the "anointing" of both preacher and hearers of the word, and trinitarian reflection on the relationship between Word and Spirit.

Finally Hilkert noted the importance in contemporary discussions of the power of the word of a critical perspective which attends to both the historical development of the scriptures and to the potential for ideological use of the scriptures as inspired and authoritative Word of God in church and society.

In response to Hilkert's presentation, Parachini confined her remarks to an examination of the role of the community in the preaching event. She addressed this aspect of preaching from both a communications and a theological perspective.

Influenced by John Macquarrie's approach to discourse in *God-Talk*, Parachini illustrated how essential are the listeners in a discourse situation if effective communication is to take place. Communication, as a dynamic process of interaction among speaker, listeners and the message communicated, necessitates the active involvement of both speakers and listeners. Both preacher and hearers share in the enactment of the proclaimed word. Some communications experts claim that the listeners in a discourse situation actually control the process on the basis of what they need or desire from the situation. For these experts, communication cannot happen without the active engagement of the listeners. Unless the listener is attending to what is said, there is little chance that the message is really heard or that the listener takes a position toward what is said.

Examining the community's role from a theological perspective, Parachini drew primarily from Karl Rahner's theology. For Rahner, the Christian is continually invited and challenged to respond to God's self-communication in Christ. The Christian believer, primarily a listener, is one who hears the word of God proclaimed in the ordinary circumstances of life as well as in the worship assembly. The life of the believer in the midst of which the word is proclaimed predisposes the Christian to, and is influenced by, the word of God proclaimed in the midst of the assembly. It would be inconceivable from Rahner's perspective to accept a notion of preaching that did not give significant attention to the participation of the listeners since for him there is no preaching without hearing, a hearing that calls for transformation and a life lived in relationship to that which is proclaimed.

Parachini concluded her response by sharing the results of her survey of some of the preaching texts most frequently used in Roman Catholic seminaries. She evaluated the ways in which these texts treated the four elements referred to by Hilkert in attempting to locate the power of the word in the preaching event (the referent, the medium, the liturgical context, and the role of the Holy Spirit). After making specific comments on each text in light of the above, she reported two findings of particular interest to the theological community. First, she found a lack of treatment of the role of the Holy Spirit in any of the texts examined. Some of the texts mentioned the Holy Spirit explicitly several times but in most of them the role of the Spirit was merely implied. Second, she noted the general lack of theological reflection done in a systematic way throughout the preaching texts. Although some of the texts treated various theological questions, there was little attempt to integrate the insights of systematic or biblical theology in a significant way.

Three main issues surfaced in the brief discussion that followed. One participant suggested that the relationship between preaching and praxis should be emphasized more strongly in a discussion of the power of the word to bring about conversion in the community of faith. The question of parnetic preaching also

emerged. How and in what way is it appropriate for the preacher to address moral issues in the liturgical context? How does one, for example, preach on the bishops' pastorals on peace or economics? A final concern was voiced with regard to the insight that all preaching is ultimately dialogical. If listeners are to be active participants in the preaching event, what kind of parish formation programs, parish life, and liturgical celebrations are necessary to make that ideal a reality?

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