

## Beyond “Border Raids”: Theory as Intrinsic to Practical Theology

Jacob D. Myers

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In her recent book, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*, Bonnie Miller-McLemore presents a helpful and compelling case for a more inclusive theology that draws explicitly from the disciplines of practical theology. She argues that scholars writing in the sub-fields of practical theology have “disrupted conventional theological boundaries,” and that such a disruption has opened up the guilds to attend more closely to the lived reality of human persons.<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as practical theology attends to this lived reality of human persons, scholars have recognized the importance of drawing upon the work of theorists in the human sciences more broadly.

Myriad theoretical approaches from the fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy have thus shaped the trajectory of practical theology. However, most practical theologians recognize the dangers inherent in pilfering theory from the human sciences for theory’s sake. Such “border raids” bring harm to practical theology by failing to appreciate the disciplinary nuances germane to the theories they borrow and thus reinscribing biases and problems worked out by later generations of theorists from within those fields.<sup>2</sup>

Most graduate programs in practical theology now require outside expertise beyond the respective guilds of practical theology.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing the dangers of studying human persons in relation to religious rites and rituals in a vacuum, most doctoral students in practical theology are required to master theory/theories from the human sciences. Many programs encourage students to work towards a graduate certificate, or a least a minor, in an area beyond the discipline of practical theology. Such pedagogical emphasis is founded upon the assumption that in order to better understand the relation between humans and the Divine, robust theoretical tools are required.

In keeping with this movement toward theory in practical theology, the authors assembled for this issue of *Practical Matters* represent the cutting edge of the next generation of scholars in practical theology. Following in the wake of recent trends in homiletics, liturgica, and pastoral theology, these scholars draw theories from the human sciences into critical conversation with their respective disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

### *Critical Essays at the Intersection of Theory and Practical Theology*

Adam Hearlson, Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship and Director of Wilson Chapel at Andover Newton Theological School, engages human social structures vis-à-vis homiletics. In his essay, "The Promise of Pierre Bourdieu's Social Theories of Practice for the Field of Homiletics," Hearlson is right to acknowledge the troubled relation between theory and practice, noting that practice can support the work of practitioners, but it can also obfuscate the preaching task, barring access to some and puffing up the egos of others. Homileticians are prone to monetize theory, and yet, as Hearlson puts it, "Theory is the necessary analytic tool that helps make sense of the complex configuration of action in the world."

His essay is written for homileticians, offering a theoretically robust account of how those who study preaching might become more astute observers thereof. For Pierre Bourdieu, human agency and institutional structures are mutually constituted and influential. By drawing upon Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, Hearlson is able to break down the antimonial tendencies at work in homiletics that structure the relationship between the preacher and the practice of preaching. Moreover, Bourdieu's articulation of a *field*—the social setting in which capitalist energies are actualized—helps Hearlson apply pressure to the guild of homiletics.

Drawing from Bourdieu, Hearlson identifies two cautions against which homileticians ought to grapple: a caution about "pre-packaged observational methods" and a caution against "romantic notions of change." Hearlson encourages homileticians to allow for the "practical logic" of preaching to work itself out through the regulated improvisation of an actor (preacher) within the field (preaching). In conjunction with Mary McClintock Fulkerson's important work, Hearlson advocates a broadening of the scope of (homiletical) analysis to make sense of the practical logic operating within the fields that intersect the preaching event. Hearlson commends a "flexible improvisatory research agenda" that attends to the field of preaching in the broadest possible terms.

In relation to his second homiletical caution, Hearlson passes on Bourdieu's pessimism regarding the power of the individual to change one's *habitus*, much less one's *field*. While still believing that preaching can effect change (following Certeau's critique of Bourdieu), and that hope for change remains an important homiletical goal, Hearlson reminds us of the realities articulated by Bourdieu's social theories of domination and subordination. Following Certeau, Hearlson argues for a "tactical homiletic" that aims to seize upon moments ripe for homiletical and social reform—the *kairos* of preaching.

Bourdieu's social theory calls for reflexive practices in the field of homiletics. Hearlson urges homileticians to attend to the power dynamics in play between students and professors: the "objectivation of she who objectivises." In other words, "Homileticians are called to make conclusions not only about preachers and congregations, but about their own world that sponsors the observation." Furthermore, Hearlson calls for greater attention to history in the field of homiletics. He writes against the detemporalization of homiletics that arises when homileticians ignore the diachronic dimension of the practice of preaching; it ignores the homiletical habitus.

Matthew Potts serves as Assistant Professor of Ministry Studies at Harvard Divinity School. His essay, "Preaching in the Subjunctive: Towards a Ritual Homiletics," places homiletics into critical conversation with ritual theory. In particular, Potts engages the work of Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, whose 2008 publication, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, argues against sincerity as the litmus test for ritual fidelity and efficacy. Against sincerity, Seligman et al. posit a social function to ritual that expands upon and critiques theoretical understandings articulated within the study of religion since Durkheim.

Ritualized actions operate in the field of what Seligman et al. call the subjunctive, which facilitates the construction of a possible world, rather than in the field of the sincere, that is, in the uncovering of a more authentic world. This focus upon the real or authentic meaning behind signs and acts, rather than the meaning constructed by them, they term sincerity. Potts, while appreciating much of what Seligman et al. offer, challenges their division between the sacred and a secular, writing, "As convincing as their argument is, however, I would like to complicate this picture somewhat through a consideration of the Protestant liturgical act of preaching."

Potts argues that Protestant preaching offers a more complicated ritual scenario than that conceived by Seligman et al., and also that a subjunctive limit to sincerity is already implied in Protestant worship, specifically in the Protestant conception of the sacraments, and even in the ritual act of preaching itself. Potts explains,

In other words, I aim here to reconceive the conventional semantics of the sermon, to relocate where the meaning of preaching should be understood to lie. In so doing, I hope also to demonstrate how the liturgically contextualized and sacramentally situated act of Christian preaching both expresses and complicates the subjunctive/sincere duality Seligman et al. have proposed.

With remarkable economy and fluency, Potts does not so much argue with Seligman et al. for a subjunctive understanding of ritual, but that such a subjunctive mood is already featured in Protestant theology. Engaging Augustine and Luther, and Barth and Bultmann, Potts contends that, for modern Protestant thought, the sermon *does* more than it *says*. Its semantics are subjunctive. Its meanings lie in its ritual rather than in its discursive function. Potts' conclusion is worth quoting in full:

The sermon is ritual. Its truth is prospective, not propositional. It is the collective expression of a gathered Christian community, not the sincere confession of a single Christian authority. It is an exercise in behaving *as if* these confusing words were somehow true, *as if* this struggling community were somehow graced, *as if* the fractured world around us somehow gave us cause for hope.

Gerald C. Liu was recently appointed Assistant Professor of Homiletics and Worship Arts at Drew Theological School. Liu's work spans the fields of music, homiletics, and liturgics. His essay, "Music and the Generosity of God," draws upon aesthetic theory and phenomenology to make a profoundly theological argument about God's mode of self-revelation in Christian worship.

With American composer John Cage, Liu argues for the ubiquity of music—that music appears everywhere sound occurs. With Roman Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, Liu further contends that God is beyond Being (in the metaphysical sense), and that God is thus beyond human description. Liu is careful to avoid collapsing the Divine into music; rather, he argues that music is given by God, and such givenness (in the phenomenological sense) reveals something profound about God. Liu argues against the majority consensus in theological aesthetics *à la* Nicholas Wolterstorff and Jeremy Begbie by offering a sympathetic theological interpretation of John Cage's work. Liu finds an ally in Jean-Luc Marion. Beyond authorial or artistic intention, the work of art *gives itself* in the act of givenness. As Liu asserts, "Marion's notion of overwhelming and autotelic welcome harmonizes with Cage's notion of divine visitation. Marion's declaration that the expectation of the viewer becomes exceeded sounds like the conversion that Cage describes with regard to viewers who experience the *White Paintings*." It is this excess, this something more, that is theologically generative for Liu.

If it is true, as Liu avers, that "music occurs in every place and gives itself freely to every person in the world," then Cage and Marion help us think beyond the constraints of music theory. Moreover, if it is true that God reveals Godself through acts of music, then Liu reasons that Cage and Marion might help us imagine God's self-givenness beyond the confines of post-Enlightenment metaphysics. Liu concludes, "Whether God seems terrifyingly present or remote, sounds in every place enunciate a holy benevolence whose declarations cannot be contained by 4'33" and phenomenological arguments." This helps practical theologians—especially liturgical theologians and homileticians, scholars who specialize in sounds performed/occurring in worship spaces—to think about Divine charity in novel ways.

Philip Browning Helsel serves as Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Boston College. In his essay, "Definitional Ceremonies as Counter-Rituals to Case Conferences in Pastoral Care," Helsel helps us to think critically about a common feature of pastoral care and

counseling: talking about clients without their knowledge in therapeutic case conferences. Clearly troubled by the disempowerment of the client, Helsel engages the definitional ceremonies articulated by narrative therapists, ritual theorists, and anthropologists like Barbara Myerhoff to help pastoral caregivers and counselors avoid the disempowerment of their patients.

Hsel challenges the formalized procedures of case management whereby a patient is reduced to her symptoms or diagnoses and wherein her voice is silenced by describing some of the problems with the clinical case conference as a model for pastoral care and counseling. He then arguing for an alternative: the "definitional ceremony" of narrative therapy. Helsel writes, "Reclaiming ritual as a pastoral care and counseling practice bridges the false dichotomy that has developed between the public role of the minister and the seemingly private act of pastoral counseling." People begin to feel like they belong when they witness the impact their stories have upon others, explains Helsel. Definitional ceremonies enable this task by reminding persons of how their stories are linked to the narratives of others. Furthermore, definitional ceremonies can be helpful when people have lost the narrative thread of their own lives since through them they hear the imagery and poetry of their own stories resonating in the lives of others.

By placing ritual theory into critical conversation with a well established analytic in practical theology—liberation theology—Hsel pays astute attention to the power dimensions involved in case conferences and the ways in which definitional ceremonies can empower patients. Following the work of Catherine Bell, in particular, Helsel maintains that we need a complex theory of social ritual to account for how persons position themselves in relationship to the mental health case conference. Helsel avers, "Narrative therapy fosters a *definitional ceremony* process that we can think of as a counter-practice to the case conference." Moreover, Helsel contends that definitional ceremonies are especially promising forms of conversation for persons who may have lost narrative control over their stories because they are suffering a problem that is frequently silenced in our culture or because they believe that they are to blame because of a problem that they have. Helsel engages definitional ceremonies from narrative therapy to posit an alternative framework to the case conference, a sort of counter-ritual.

Richard William Voelz, a recent Ph.D. graduate of Vanderbilt University with specialties in homiletics and youth studies, serves currently as Senior Minister at Johns Creek Christian Church in Johns Creek, Georgia. His essay is entitled, "Reconsidering the Image of Preacher-as-Teacher: Intersections Between Henry Giroux's Critical Pedagogy and Homiletics." As the title indicates, Voelz draws upon Henry Giroux's critical pedagogy to reframe the way homileticians and preachers think about the task of preaching vis-à-vis teaching.

Voelz is right to assert that how one understands oneself as a preacher shapes every aspect of the sermon preparation and delivery process. He begins by acknowledging an historical precedent for understanding the preacher as teacher, but concludes that "[b]y and large, however, the image of teacher-as-preacher does not surface in the most recent images . . . as a compelling image for

contemporary preaching and homiletic reflection. It certainly has not presented itself as a robust image in contemporary homiletics." Voelz's essay is an attempt to remedy this paucity by engaging the field of critical pedagogy.

Voelz explains that critical pedagogy is a school of thought that questions contemporary theories and practices of education, the reasons for its deficiencies, and the possibilities for education in specific contexts. Drawing upon Frankfurt School theorists like Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse, critical pedagogy views knowledge as a political production. Thus, Giroux's theory advances a way of thinking about teaching as both a reproductive and transmissive mode of education, while at the same time, seeing it as a means of accessing the democratic potential that can lead to freedom from oppressive structures. Following Giroux, educators are empowered to see their students as more than sites for depositing knowledge or as a potential skilled workforce. Rather, teachers can view their task as that of creating environments where students can be critical agents in their own formation, with active rather than passive voices. Hence students are encouraged to see their education as leading toward social responsibility, and in particular, the alleviation of suffering, inequalities, and injustice experienced by others.

Voelz, following Giroux, promotes an understanding of the preacher-as-teacher beyond the facile and uncritical pedagogical assumptions of most preacher-teachers. Voelz's preacher-teacher preaches toward a vision of the public sphere with broad cultural awareness. Framed in the language of democracy, scholars of preaching would imagine this public sphere through the lens of ecclesiology. In other words, Voelz argues that if the theories and practices of critical pedagogy enact a particular kind of public sphere, then preachers ought to portray distinct ecclesiological formations within their preaching as well.

Preaching-as-teaching, following Voelz's Girouxian inspired vision, also stands to reshape the preacher's understanding of her authority vis-à-vis her listeners. Voelz imagines the preacher's authority in a way that acknowledges and avoids the critiques of authoritarianism leveled by recent homileticians. Moreover, by viewing the preacher-teacher as a "reflective practitioner," following the teachings of critical pedagogy, Voelz offers a way of thinking about the preacher-teacher in a way that frames the listener's experience of the sermon toward ecclesial and cultural transformation.

### ***Theory and Praxis: Creative Proposals from the Field***

This issue of *Practical Matters* also features ways in which theory can inform and shape homiletical and liturgical practices. Homiletician Lance B. Pape, who serves as Granville and Erline Walker Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Brite Divinity School, draws upon the hermeneutical and philosophical insights of Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur to offer a way of preaching stewardship sermons. His essay, entitled "Talking about Money in the Presence of Jesus: Biblical Hermeneutics and the Call for Topical Preaching," addresses the timely issue of topical preaching. Pape makes

the compelling argument that rather than searching for a prescriptive statement from Jesus on a topic and then conveying that point in a sermon, a better approach is to consider what it would be like to discuss a given topic in the presence of Jesus.

Following the work of Frei and Ricoeur, Pape argues that the act of extracting some abstract meaning from the Synoptic Gospels and then presenting this as the content of the gospels is tantamount to hermeneutical violence. Rather, in order to avoid such violence, hermeneuts and preachers are called to honor the world "in front of the text." Here Pape draws explicitly from Ricoeur's phenomenology of reading. Furthermore, following Frei, Pape views the genre-specific "world" created in front of the gospels as one in which the character of Jesus is rendered. Since the gospels aim to render a *person* and not a *topic*, topical sermons necessarily miss the intention of the text to reveal a personality: Jesus. As Pape puts it, "For the Christian preacher, the encounter in the world in front of these texts is an encounter with a living presence." Pape concludes with a sermon on the topic of financial stewardship that resists the temptation toward hermeneutical violence, but moves to the startling, but undeniable, assessment that Jesus is not very good with money. Pape's conclusion is compelling: "In a real sense, both the text and the sermon are not about money at all, but about this Jesus and his unique way of being in the world."

Keegan Osinski is Master of Library and Information Science in the Divinity Library at Vanderbilt University. Her essay, "Archive, Anamnesis, & Real-Beyond-Presence in the Eucharistic Liturgy," draws upon the deconstructive philosophy of John D. Caputo. She argues that the goal of the liturgy is to make space. The space created by liturgical rites has been dominated with an obsession for presence. However, Osinski contends that at an intrinsic and irreducible level, the liturgy traffics in absences as the necessary conditions for the possibility of a remembrance and what she labels a "real-beyond-presence."

Osinski's essay is Caputoian in its form as well as its content, dancing playfully in the necessary absence of language to signify a lacuna, an absence, a "perhaps," at the heart of liturgical experience. She focuses her argument on the Eucharist. The Eucharistic prayer is anamnetic inasmuch as the worship participant is called to partake of the bread and wine *in remembrance* of Jesus. She writes, "Rather than instantiating a presence, anamnesis necessitates an absence. And this absence—which may be seen as a kind of khora, a non-place space, perhaps—is where we may encounter the Real." As a site of forgetting that calls for a certain re-remembering, Osinski likens the Eucharist to an archive. Drawing from Jacques Derrida's teaching on the archive as a place that is simultaneously a place of remember and forgetting, where meanings are both found and lost, Osinski argues that liturgy functions as an archive, this external locus allowing, encouraging, and providing the framework for the repetition of loss and thus, remembrance. Her essay helps officiants and liturgical participants alike to reimagine the role of the Eucharist in opening a space for radical hospitality that awaits the inpouring of God's presence, perhaps.

The final essay in this issue of *Practical Matters* differs from the others in both form and function. "Finding Our Way: A (De)Constructive Labyrinth Experience," curated by Andy Smith, Matt

Rich, Shelley Hasty Woodruff, and Jacob D. Myers—all former staff members of Wieuca Road Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia—offers itself as a multimedia event wherein readers may enter a virtual labyrinth created through the Prezi platform.

“Finding Our Way,” draws upon the philosophies of Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo to deconstruct contemporary assumptions about the self and the church in North American contexts. The labyrinth functions like a contemporary art installment. The worship participant is invited to make her way through the labyrinth and at pre-designed stations to critically reflect upon one’s spiritual understanding of oneself vis-à-vis God and the church. The Prezi allows readers of *Practical Matters* to “walk” the labyrinth and listen to the same tracks that the original participants were invited to experience.

### **Conclusion**

At day’s end, the essays included in this issue of *Practical Matters* spotlight the work of the emerging generation of scholars and practitioners. We are excited about the conversations these essays will open in their respective guilds and we welcome further contributions at the intersection of worship, ritual, and theory in upcoming editions of *Practical Matters*. Lastly, we would like to offer a public word of thanks to our faculty advisor, Ed Phillips. Without his support this issue would not have been possible.

Jacob D. Myers  
Emory University

### *Notes*

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**1** Bonnie J. Miller-Mclemore, *Christian Theology In Practice: Discovering A Discipline* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge, Uk: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 1.

**2** An example of this may be found in the recent publication by Angela M. Yarber, *The Gendered Pulpit: Sex, Body, And Desire In Preaching And Worship* (Cleveland, Tn: Parson’s Porch Books, 2013). Writing from the purview of practical theology (homiletics), Yarber breezes over how racial identity impacts pulpit proclamation, lumping racialized bodies in with sexualized and gendered bodies (33). Furthermore, she fails to acknowledge the nuanced scholarly perspectives that divide lesbian and feminist scholars (see Lynne Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?: A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2013]). Further still, most of her scholarly interlocutors are severely out of date (many of her sources are from the 1970’s and 1980’s) or curiously peripheral to current debates on these themes (the exception being her chapter on dance).

**3** This is a trend long in the making. See Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley, *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991); David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching: A New Homiletic Based on the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969); and David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987).

**4** See Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions in Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1997); John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001); Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); and Lance B. Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something To Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), to name but a few examples of recent books that draw homiletics into conversation with theories from the human sciences.