

The Transforming Power of Preaching With Imagination

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the connection between the imagination of a gifted preacher and the illuminating work of the Spirit. There is a commonly held assumption that the stimulation of a congregation's imagination by a sermon is critical if it is to have any transformative effect on the hearers. Robert Dykstra first explored this connection by drawing upon Donald Winnicott's version of Object Relations Theory as it relates to infant play and development. He also asserted that boring preaching was in a congregation's interest and a product of collaboration between both parties. While Dykstra's proposal is compelling this leaves the tension unresolved that this would imply that the transcendent purposes of the Spirit depend upon the talents of the preacher evoking human God imaging processes. Winnicott's theory also implies that the images provoked by imaginative preaching are just projections from the psyche of the hearers and nothing more. A more compelling paradigm for the connection between God's revelation and human imagination can be found by applying Moshe Spero's recent version of O.R. theory as it allows space for a divine revelatory role in the playful/transformative preaching-hearing encounter. Parallels between the work of the imaginative preacher and therapist show how imagination actually respects the redemptive initiative of the Spirit in several key ways. Practical implications for those preparing compelling sermons follow automatically from this theological insight.

Introduction

Not all preachers have the capacity to generate interest in their sermons in the minds of the hearers of their sermons. The preparation and delivery of a sermon for the regular preaching pastor is a largely emotional affair as well. Unless the preacher places very little value in the ministry of preaching, there are moments in the week of preparation where an involved preacher has mood swings involving frustration with a text that will not divulge its 'secrets', to an exhilaration when a text becomes a message takes on a subjective life of its own and demands to be shared with others. The impact of this emotionality is rarely explored theologically.

The assertion is often made that, to the extent that a preacher interacts with the Scripture text imaginatively to that same extent it will resonate with and stimulate the imagination of the audience. Moreover, to the extent that the preaching stimulates the imaginations of the audience and engages them in the drama of the message delivered to them, to that same extent they will be transformed by that event. Such linkages are also rarely argued theologically. Recent writers who do not have any interest in devaluing the power of the Gospel in its own right, or the necessity of its preaching for salvation, still maintain that the simulation of imagination is the zone where the Word encounters the world with power.¹

Carter Florence says ...

The imagination it's a point of contact between God and God's people ...
but it is more, it is where God meets us and saves us.

In similar vein, Pembroke argues in particular for the use of therapeutic analogies for the effective communication of the Gospel.²

... the aim is to use insights from counselling theory and practice to find appropriate analogues that not only help to explain the nature of God's therapy as expressed in the particular text, but that also facilitate greater openness to that therapy. That is, the analogues should not be seen as merely didactic aids. The aim is not simply to provide some interesting insights. The analogues should be seen first and foremost as instruments that serve to open the heart and mind of the listener to God's healing grace. That is they are used in an attempt to strike a chord in the listener: to simulate openness to renewal and transformation through divine therapy.

Yet this sort of assertion, despite its intuitive appeal, is assumed rather than justified by theological reflection or theoretical basis. The aim of this essay is primarily to build a defence of this assertion by suggesting a theologically defensible basis by interpreting the preaching event through the lens of Object Relations Theory.

The Intuitions of the New Homiletic

This was implicitly the insight of the 'New Homiletic' movement so called, which began with Fred Craddock's apology for inductive preaching. This set the theme for the new homiletic of the 1980's.³ This was met with and continues to be met with a negative 'knee-jerk' reaction from those from more conservative ranks.⁴ This is in part as Craddock was not of their school and in part because he was heard to be saying the Scriptures themselves were not

¹ A Carter Florence, *The Preaching Imagination*, *Teaching Preaching as Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletic Pedagogy*, T G Long and L T Tisdale (Eds.) Louisville, WJKP, 2008, 122f. From "Theocentric Therapeutic Preaching: An Analogical Approach" *IJPT* 2013: 17(2)

² N Pembroke, *Theocentric Therapeutic Preaching: An Analogical Approach*, *International Journal of Practical Theology* (2013), 17 No. 2

³ F B Craddock *As One Without Authority: Revised*, St Louis, Chalice, (2001/1971)

⁴ For instance see Al Mohler's reflection in *The Briefing*, Dec 12 edition, 2008 "As One With Authority".

intrinsically authoritative. In fact, he was alerting the church that the authority of the preacher could no longer be assumed in an anti-authoritarian age.⁵

What is more critical here though is not the theological bona fides of the New Homiletic but that this attitude was also characterised as 'narrative preaching' or, alternately, 'the move towards the audience. This is more about the rhetoric of the sermon than the genre of the underlying Scripture and much more subtle than the mere insertion of stories into a series of exegetical facts. These writers whatever the specifics of their methodology advocated for an inductively narrative sermon *experience*; one that grips the audience, catching them in the creative act of imagining, and that train of events bears some of the essential characteristics that occur when the audience listens to a well-constructed narrative. The particular quality that generates this is the capacity of the preacher to both signal that a critical issue is being engaged, to build suspense and momentum.⁶

This article attempts to push beyond this further by reflecting upon what actually is happening ontologically, what reality connection has the work of the preacher with the work of the present God in those times when a preacher produces a sermon with creative merit and powerful impact. This synthesis of theory, theology and practice is not original. Princeton scholar Robert Dykstra⁷ first proposed this creative process employing Donald Winnicott's Object Relations theory as the framework to explain the impact of imaginative preaching. Again this work was not reviewed fondly by the conservative homiletic fraternity for similar reasons as the reaction to the New Homiletic. Whereas Craddock and co. called for a rethinking of deductive preaching rhetoric in the face of a late twentieth century resistance towards authority figures, Dykstra is responding to a similar dogmatism in homiletic approach in the face of a twenty first century pervasive 'boredom', or, disinterest in the hearing of the word in the event of preaching. Dykstra's vision of the preacher's task supplies a practical theological rationale which undergirds the narrative homiletic approach. This is entirely compatible with a robust evangelical perspective.

We must begin firstly, to reappraise Dykstra's ingenious linking of preacher craft to Object Relations Theory and to press beyond these suggestive connections by supplementing Winnicott with other expressions of Object Relations theory. This provides a firmer theological

⁵ This was demonstrated by the fact that the contemporary conservative father and son team Lewis and Lewis ably defended the inductive process of sermon delivery on the basis of a clearly high view of Christ and Scripture. See R L Lewis & G Lewis *Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen*, Crossway, Wheaton, 1983.

⁶ In fact Lowry recently has suggested that despite their significant stylistic differences the major players in this movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Lowry himself, Scott Wilson, Long, Buttrick and Craddock are all articulating this same homiletic principal though from different starting points. See E L Lowry, *The Homiletical Beat: Why all Sermons are Narrative*, Nashville, Abingdon, 2012, 29-30.

⁷ Robert Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching*, (St Louis, Chalice Press, 2001).

defence as to why imaginative preaching engages the conscious thoughts of the congregation in a way that unreflective or, unimaginative exegesis is unlikely to do so.

Where Imagination arises in the preaching event

Human imagination functions within numerous situations surrounding the preaching event.

These include:

- (i) The preparatory phase as the preacher notices the poetics of the original documents. This develops in time to a resonance with the dynamics between the writer and their supposed original audience.
- (ii) This can generate the emotions and memories associated with parallel situations in the contemporary world out of which a contextualized imperative or an image emerges.
- (iii) Then again imagination surfaces as one conceives of what faith or obedience to that imperative would look like in the lives of the current hearers.⁸
- (iv) The rhetorical choices that affect the sermon presentation requires imagination in the form of projection forward into the experience that the audience will have if they are to experience the force of that promise or imperative.
- (v) Lastly, imagination is at play in the existential moment of delivery. This involves more than the reporting of the preparation or an act of memory. It includes the reliving of the moods and images that emerged then as well as spontaneous symbols and connective tissue that often surfaces unexpectedly in that moment.

This exercise demonstrates then that there are many points where imaginative capacity is demanded of the sermonic task lest sufficient audience stimulation may not eventuate. It is important then to examine where imagination or creativity is developed and how it may be suppressed. This is where Dykstra provides a critical corrective.

Dykstra is not the first practical theologian to see the direct relevance of object relations theory to ministry or liturgy.⁹ Dykstra discerned a parallel between the work of the pastor with the text in preparation of a sermon, and the healthy constructive - destructive play of a child. But to appreciate Dykstra's contribution we need to sketch the contours of the underlying

⁸ Carter Florence, 'The Preaching Imagination', 123f

⁹ W W Meissner S.J. M.D., *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*, London, Yale University Press, 1984, and "The God Question in Psychoanalysis" *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 26 No. 2 (2009), 210-233, Moshe Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures: A Critical integration of Object Relations Theory, Psychotherapy and Judaism*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), Anna-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979). A & B Ulanov, *Finding Space: Winnicott, God and Psychic reality*, Louisville, (Westminster, WJKP, 2005). A & B Ulanov, *The Healing Imagination: The Meeting of Psyche and Soul*, (Canada, Daimon Verlage, 2008), P Chaudhari "Freedom for Relationship: An Initial Exploration of the Theology of Zizioulas and the Psychoanalytic insights of Winnicott in Dialogue", *Pastoral Psychology* (2013) 62: 451-460.

theory from which it is constructed; the Object Relations theory of British psycho-analyst Donald Winnicott.

Object Relations and Creativity: Where Imagination is lost or found

According to Winnicott, imagination is a critical aspect necessary for healthy infant development. Conversely, a self-censoring suppression of curiosity has to be learned and is not inborn.¹⁰ Winnicott is notable for having facilitated later thinking about God-Images and religious beliefs. This shifted the ground away from the Freudian dismissal of religious beliefs as troublesome transferences from parent images, to seeing that these 'illusions' whether or not based in objective reality, actually nourished psychic life.

Winnicott's explanation of infant development focuses on the capacity of the healthy infant to develop a sense of boundaries between the mother and themselves, between what is 'me' and what is 'not me'. These variables are the adequacy of the maternal '*holding environment*' and the provision of '*transitional objects*'. The experience of the child of the reliability of the mother's responsiveness sets the child up for a confident interaction with later life environments and develops their emerging capacity to engage in meaningful play. The first symbolic culture which the child learns to interpret is while held in the mother's arms.¹¹ The capacity to handle less than perfect maternal presence and care is provided through the availability of 'Transitional Objects'. The doll, blanket or thumb are imbued significance by the infant as a mother substitute and enable separation from the mother to occur. These are perceived as originating neither from within nor from outside the infant's own self. These serve as an intermediary on the boundary of the self between infant and the looming world beyond.

Infants at Play and Creating Creative Spaces

These potentials are reinforced in infancy through the crucial action of play and it is this capacity that Dykstra asserts will have a direct bearing on the capacity for imaginative preaching. During clinical sessions with mothers and infants, Winnicott noticed differences between anxiously disturbed versus healthy toddlers. These patterns were replicated in anxious adults who come for psycho-therapy. These sessions could also be viewed as an adult form of play. As regards healthy play a child needs to have a mother present and accessible, yet not interfering while the infant engages in play. For play to be constructive the infant's imagination manipulates an object or to pretend it to be something else. The able mother needs to be oriented toward what the infant is ready to find. How a mother or parent allows the child to play and engages in response to the play of their child determines whether

¹⁰ Robert Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching*, St Louis, Chalice, 2001.

¹¹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, (Oxon, Routledge Classic, 1971/2005), 117

the child has a sense that their created reality, and the transitional objects they are creating within this space is a shared reality; something that matters.

Winnicott sees this symbolising skill not as something innate in the infant but as a highly relational and therefore, it is a precarious operation. Winnicott's theory of play involves a potential space that is created initially between the mind of the infant and their perception of the external mother in which creative actions and symbolising work can occur. At an initial stage of play, the infant and some object in reach of the infant merge with one another. Though the object already exists where the infant is, the object is created by the infant in the sense that they identify its symbolic potential. It is a 'subjective-object' being neither totally subjective, nor totally an objective object. Secondly, the object will go through a process of being used, repudiated, reaccepted and eventually perceived objectively. The mother needs to engage with this creative activity, be found by the infant and invited into this space. The infant's confidence in the mother's presence and responsiveness makes it possible for this intermediate space to exist. At a later stage the mother only needs to be present and can be forgotten but is close enough that she can still be called upon when remembered up by the infant. Only at this later stage is the mother able to then begin to introduce her own ideas and creations into the play of the infant.

Conversely, healthy play cannot occur if the mother continually 'saves' the child from any distressing aspect or frustration with its environment. An overly interfering or distracting mother can develop a precocious 'false self' in the infant; one who screens out their own genuine passions and camouflages their own genuine impulses, even taking on the role of being overly concerned about the needs of the mother!

One needs to see though that infancy means dependence and dependency implies another. But a good enough holding environment enables the infant to be mad in a way that is conceded to babies but becomes true madness if it crops up in later life. Subjective objects in the babies' worlds become real objects, objective objects only when the holding environment is sufficient. No theory can touch the notion/source of creativity that does not take into account the environment.¹²

Creative capacity therefore cannot be taken for granted nor just attributed to innate gifting but has to do with the interaction of infant and parent in their play.¹³ The notion of *potential space* is a critical concept here. Having a playful space is a product of the capacity of the mother and child to move toward separateness. Within this space are symbols that can stand for both the external reality and the one upon whom life depends. The trust that is developed over a long enough period at this critical stage of separation of the 'me' from 'not me' and the

¹² Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 94f

¹³ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 119

establishment of an autonomous self is a product of the protection of those spaces for playing or immersing oneself in play.¹⁴

Adult cultural experience is an extension of the theory of transitional objects.¹⁵ To study the later cultural life of the individual and issues such as their fulfilment in a vocation, is to also study the fate of the potential space between any one baby and their human adaptive or loving mother figure. The place where cultural experience is found is in a parallel potential space between an adult individual and their cultural environment. The capacity to use such spaces depend on capacities developed from these early stages of existence. Winnicott sees it is impossible to be creative or original without the reliable existence of a tradition to play within and press against. The creative person is straddling between respecting and subverting their inherited tradition.

The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me to be just one more example and a very exciting one of the interplay between separateness and union.¹⁶

These creative products of our lives are what makes life feel both real and worth living. Conversely, the interruption of such enterprises or the diversionary tactics of those who control our environments can lead to a fracturing in the sense of self and producing a dull compliance associated with a false self of the disturbed infant.¹⁷ In fact, material injected into the space from someone other than the baby can appear persecutory as the infant has no means of rejecting it.¹⁸ This perspective lays beneath Dykstra's explanation of the phenomenon of boring preaching from the vantage point of both preacher and audience interests.

Creativity and Preaching

Dykstra boldly links this theory to the present vested interests of the unimaginative preacher. The preacher who preaches predictable messages in unremarkable terms could well be a compliant personality who developed their penchant for self-censorship in their infancy. The over-functioning pastoral carer type is often the least prepared preacher, most predictable, clichéd, or 'boring' preacher. One who is too caring of his or her flock to have the emotional space to engage in engrossed play with a text, never discovering a fresh sermonic insight, may actually be rewarded by the congregation for their predictable presentation. They could be acting on behalf of the congregation as the infant of the over attentive mother who intervened constantly in the play of her child to circumvent their feelings of frustration. But, for

¹⁴ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 145-148

¹⁵ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 133f

¹⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 134

¹⁷ L Hirschhorn, *The Workplace Within*, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1988), 9f.

¹⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 138ff

their part they have dampened out the chance of any spontaneous eruptions of spirit and will likely fail to challenge any familiar belief or practice or cause a re-evaluation of un-digested traditions. Such a lack of homiletic prowess is forgiven, even expected. The pastor is excused as this predictability proves that they are a caring person, gifted in compensatory areas within the cure of souls. Pastoralia covers a multitude of homiletic sins.

Creativity and Preparation

The more important issue for Dykstra concerns the means by which Pastors produce sermons. The parallel is with the play of infants in the presence of a non-interfering mother. The preacher needs to learn to play with the text, as an infant would with a 'transitional object'. Here however, the preacher is to be given license, or, in object relations parlance, *plays in solitude* while the *mother*, or, external authority, is later invited into the play on the preacher's terms. The preacher like the child must be enabled to 'destroy the object', here the expected preaching tradition, so that what the text may be saying to the new audience may be discovered afresh for this moment. Object relating must precede object using. This involves both noticing a text's features and exploiting these within their own imaginative schemes. This parallel situation of the playing infant is more than just an analogy to the preacher craft. As the preacher recreates the text it gains texture, provides warmth and moves with a reality all its own;

It singularly unites and differentiates ephemeral boundaries between the preacher's inner and outer realities as well as between the preacher's secret hopes and fears and often hidden life of God. It offers as text as object, an intimacy without invasion and individuality without isolation.¹⁹

For this to occur requires the partitioning out of their mind the self-censoring voices that would silence doubts, arcane questions or theological tensions that arise in the front of mind as the text is encountered afresh. If the preacher's practice is only to regurgitate the opinions of the expert commentators, the message may be true, or accurately explain the meaning of Scriptures, but have a deadening effect, failing to arouse curiosity in their audience. There is little sense of authenticity if the text of the sermon has not become somehow the preacher's own creation through some vigorous wrestling process.²⁰ Dykstra therefore wants to emphasise any practice or process which will stimulate curiosity and imagination. He encourages the preacher to avoid the use of commentaries at least in the earliest phases of preparation. It is not that they are wrong-headed but have a parallel emotional impact upon a preacher as the distracting parent who diverts the infant from their own exploration of the transitional object.

Being alone in the presence of another permits the discovery of authentic impulses and desires that belong solely to the infant. This accumulation of

¹⁹ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 20

²⁰ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 28

experiences contributes to the sense that life is vitally real rather than hopelessly futile.²¹

Whereas,

Precocious concern for the needs of others deadens vitality by displacing the child's awareness of his or her own personal desires. The child elevates mind over body, curbing those harbingers of surprise of feeling or spirit by means of cognition and intellectualisation.²²

These parent equivalents could also include the particular preaching tradition that one feels bound to replicate. The same impact could also be induced if during the process of preparation, the preacher was obsessed with how the most censorious members of the congregation would react to their ideas and rein their thoughts back to less risky propositions. Other strands of evangelicalism encourage an encyclopaedic approach involving cross referencing assertions in the text. Others feel constrained to converge sermonically to an invitation to 'come to the foot of the cross', or, some similar dramatic turn. This sort of deference Dykstra attributes to primal issues with interfering or unresponsive parenting.

Theological Tensions

A conservative homiletic will always be somewhat alarmed by a proposal that, on the surface of it, seems to be advocating destroying and re-creating the text for the sake of preaching the text. It hardly sounds like a respect for the authority of Scripture or may end up equating of imaginative ideas with the illumination of the Spirit. But here we need to distinguish between these two issues. There are theological reasons why Dykstra's synthesis with object relations notions are compatible with conservative views of revelation.

Authority of the Scriptural text

The nature of a transitional object that develops from an object of the infant's creation to an object in and of its own right is that it has to both undergo the 'destruction of the child' and survive the process to then become a loved object. Implicit in this process described above is in fact the trust-worthiness of the object that always returns to God having completed its purpose.²³

Rather than being dismissive of this attitude to homiletic process, those who have a high view of the text of Scripture and its underlying coherence will have more, not less reason to expose the disturbing fissures of the text and especially in this day, or the political incorrectness of

²¹ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 24

²² Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 25

²³ Isaiah 55.1-10

any of its heroes. The firm belief that the integrity of the text will survive the equivalent of the teddy bear's ear pulling of the preacher comes from a confidence in the Spirit's inspiration.

Faith as an adequate holding environment

Whereas Dykstra views the church as providing the holding environment for the believer, it would be more accurate to say that the unconditional nature of their covenant in union with Christ is that which sustains the playful imagination of preaching. The preacher, once held in the firm confidence in the covenant made by the crucified-glorified Christ, in turn supplies the holding environment for the congregation. In the process of observing, questioning, attributing motives, feeling the full brunt of the scandal of the text and 'trying on' alternative interpretations of the text, an object once received becomes the preacher's creation. Yet, like a transitional object, it has a life all of its own. There is no fear therefore that this process threatens the throne of heaven nor the reliability of fellowship. It is a process analogous to the protestations of a Peter or a Mary in the face of words of God that confounded their kosher and honour-shame scruples. The preacher, who like these ancients protests "*By no means, Lord*" (Ac 10.14) or questions "*How can this be*" (Lk 1.34), is on the way to opening new shafts of light that yearn to break through the 'boarded-up' preaching tradition. As with Eugene Lowry's 'aha' moment, or Scott Wilson's '*Word of God Now*', it is only after such playful recreation that the gospel can, at least broadly speaking, be seen to provide a more than satisfying resolution and that is a truly exhilarating moment of delight for the preacher in the study and the listening audience who later on travels down that path. Once in preached form the message becomes an object itself having a life form of its own. The congregation is invited to now play with this new derivative text in live time.

The development of the preaching charisma

Analogous to the confidence and resilience built into the infant through play, the ministry of preaching can be helping the preacher themselves at a psychological level to forge a secure identity. In this sense the preacher is liable to become even more secure in their craft and in the confidence that in some way the particular text contains a particular gift germane to the present life quest of themselves and their hearers. A creative preacher should be one whom the congregation should be able to notice a deepening, a progress in their craft²⁴ that transcends mere stage-craft or communication skills alone. Likewise as they themselves find their imaginations enlivened and find themselves giving the nod or preferably the 'shock of recognition',²⁵ they too are liable to be transformed spiritually as they find their own hearts 'burn' with the fire of recognition as the word is opened up to them again, but as if heard for the first time.

²⁴ I Timothy 4.15

²⁵ Fred Craddock, *Craddock on the Craft of Preaching*, (St Louis, Chalice, 2011), 117-136

Analogies from Creation for the Divine Realm

The specific content of that craft particularly has to do with a parabolic vision; that two stories, the biblical and contemporary, can be put together as metaphorically related parallels. Where Dykstra's sermon examples may not be fully convincing at this point, at least the listeners are moved from the comfort of a pre-digested orthodoxy to the boundary of a faith that makes claims upon belief and behaviour in the present day imagination of the hearer.

If ministers are to avoid expositing the obvious they must be able to see something - some subtlety, some singularity, or some mystery - that others overlook.²⁶

It is critical that the metaphors, or parables used be truly interesting to the preacher, at least, and hopefully the audience alike.²⁷ That way, Dykstra asserts, the audience can be engaged at a deeper emotional level. The more central theological issue is whether God's sanctifying work is actually affected by the pertinence of the particular parallel or even other formal aspects of the message.

Sanctifying both preacher and the people

Sanctification by its very nature implies that the saint is 'a work in progress'. A safe approach that recites the faith in overly familiar non-challenging terms, though applauded by the devout, is more likely to produce an introspective sect than the sort of authentic witness that is needed to embrace the complexities of faith in a distorted and complex world. But denying the listener the opportunity to be challenged, or to hear something of the preacher's own wrestling with a text or its imperative, has the effect of insinuating that there is nothing new to be known.²⁸ This is the parallel of the simulation of intimacy that the disturbed infant avoids, the solitary state of unknowing. It is not orthodoxy that is the enemy, but this prematurely-extruded-orthodoxy shorn of any mysterious aspects. Preaching that conveys the sense that all the doctrinal 'ends have been tied up' by those clever commentators, under whose dominating shadow the message has been constructed is as noted already, performing the role of the distracting mother. Ironically, this devotion is liable to produce both a theological and psychological insecurity.

Illumination or Illusion: An alternative deistic object relations explanation

This brings us to the theological crux of the initial question issue. It would seem to be the theological corollary of this insight that the lack of capacity or otherwise of the preacher to provoke the imagination of the audience and their textual encounter, constrains the likelihood of the divine-human encounter occurring during the preparation or presence of preaching.

²⁶ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 44

²⁷ Dykstra would argue it is the curiosity of the preacher that is sufficient here to stimulate the audience curiosity even if in an absolute sense the experience is not normally one that would raise the interest of the hearer.

²⁸ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 87-89

Two polar views of this relationship can be ruled out. On the one hand we could reduce all seemingly transcendent encounters in preaching as mere illusions. This would seem to be akin to the Freudian iconoclastic dismissal of all religious reality as purely subjective phenomenon, projections from the primal world of the infant. By this logic images of God are confused with images of the father and given more significance than they deserve. Such blanket reductionism rules out divine revelation entirely. At the other extreme, it is equally unsubtle to assume that the words and imaginative constructions of the developing creative imaginative preacher are automatically identical to the illuminating work of the Spirit.²⁹ A midpoint position constantly maintained though is that somehow the very God Images supplied by the preacher serve to open the divine human communication channels and therefore the capacity of the preaching even to be pastorally transformative.³⁰

Other object relations theorists remind us that psychic reality cannot come into existence without the provision of intermediate transitional space where play and illusion making occur.³¹ Moreover, these illusions are not necessarily just infantile wish fulfillments ala Freud. In comparison to the perfections of the Scriptures, the images the pastor and preacher encounter in the sermon are just as likely to be the God images and reconstructions of the imagination of the pastor akin to the God images that percolate through our prayers,³² or, those images which are brought to the surface through therapy.³³ This issue requires reflection at a meta-psychological level. However, we need not despair that the inferiority of our limited, or, sin affected perspectives rules out any discernible connection with the revealing work of God's Spirit.

Another recent Object Relations theorist, Moshe Spero, supplies a way through this conundrum. Human Imaging of God and the reality of God are not mutually exclusive options. Spero proposes that the situation within the mind of the believer is more complex than just a choice between viewing all God images as psychological or creations of the mind alone, or that all images of God in the mind of the believer are pure revelations of the objective reality of God. Instead Spero identifies three reasoned alternatives to unmediated revelation, thereby suggesting a total of four potential pathways through which a God image may be perceived. He is referring particularly to the mind of the infant. Through the subjective imaginings of transitional space the objective realities of the world are negotiated and

²⁹ Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*, 181

³⁰ See the argument of Pembroke referred to above. Pembroke effectively refutes the Barthian 'extreme position' that reduces to an argument that analogies of faith may effectively be comported through analogies of being. That is to say that God's revelation in creation both corresponds to and is fulfilled by God's revelation in Christ and should not be in conflict with it. Pembroke, *Theocentric*, 325.

³¹ Rizzuto, *A The Birth of the Living God*, (University of Chicago Press, 1979), 209

³² Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*, 182

³³ Moshe Halevi Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures: A Critical Integration of Object Relations Theory, Psychotherapy and Judaism*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press), 1992,

accepted. And if God is one of those realities and allows access to Himself through self-revelation, then it would seem that the knowing of God mediated through human subjective imagining of this objective God is possible. If we hold that there is a purposeful design in the developmental psyche of the child, with a view to the objective that God desired to hold forth the possibility of being discerned in the life-world of his human creatures, it is not a huge assumption to make that he would have created mechanisms through which such discovery is indeed possible.³⁴ We know that God objects emerge during the transitional phase and are apparently universal, even if rudimentary.³⁵ These God representations are providential and have the capacity to turn the personality toward noetic, or, spiritual phenomena during the early developmental stages. This is a period when the distinction between earthly and transcendent objects is incomplete.

If Spero is correct, image transferences may be occurring in multiple directions so that God is perceived as possessing both anthropocentric traits and deocentric traits. Both feature in endopsychic God representations. God may appear to have fatherly qualities and it is just as likely that fathers may appear God-like. But it requires special pleading to reduce all transferences solely to psychological origins generated from inside the mind of the infant which are projected outwards and then re-introjected as God objects into the self.³⁶ The critical issue for Spero is that God or at least an Image of God can be discerned *through*, not despite, the process of interpersonal transference. Furthermore, this is a necessary prior stage developmentally to the apprehension of a divine object image. Such images are logically differentiable from the endopsychic god representation which Freud assumed explained the whole religious experience.³⁷ A childhood concept of God, say, as the father may well be childish and inadequate. But the important issue is that an individual may perceive an image of God originating from God's own Self regardless of the pathway into the mind of the believer, or what other images it picks up or intersects with along the pathway. Several 'pathways' to an image are possible then as indicated in the diagram overleaf.

Firstly, via route B, one could logically envisage some internalized God Images or 'God Objects' directly being an encounter with the psyche and the revelation of the divine.³⁸ Secondly, via route C, other images of God form that are mediated through other object representations of other relationships such as with parents. These real relationships are in some ways preparatory for the direct relating above and could include say the love of parents

³⁴ Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures*, 140. This does not lock us into the view though that the image of God is a set of faculties rather than a status in God's eternal purposes.

³⁵ Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures*, 79 ,80

³⁶ Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures*, 140

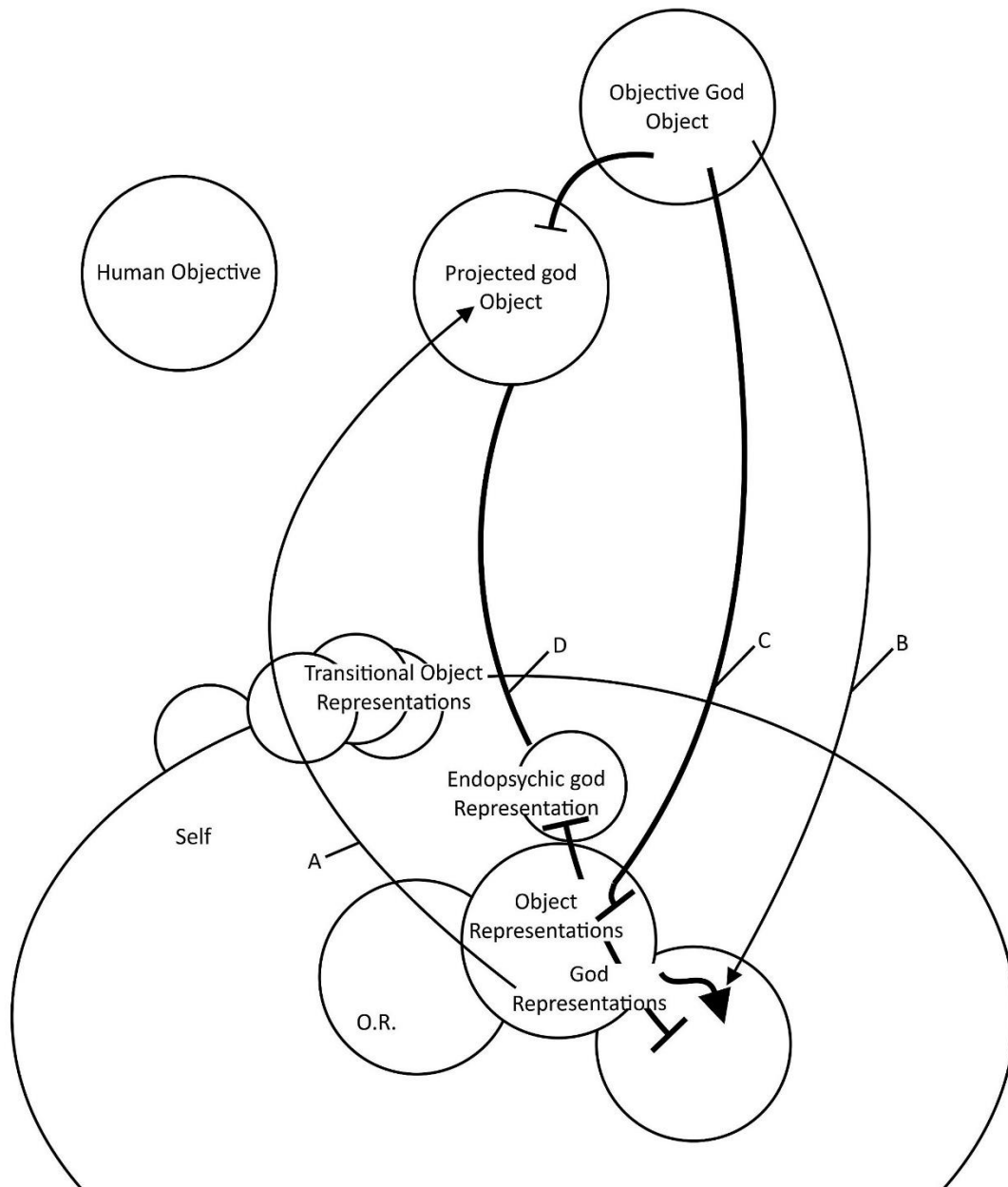
³⁷ Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures*, 153

³⁸ The diagram here is adapted from Spero's, *Religious Objects*, 153. An orthodox theological position however would tend to view the ontological distinction between Creator and creature as too great to traverse for an unmediated perception of the revelation of the divine Image as via route A. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 1; Prolegomena*, Trans. J Virend, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2003) 310.

preparing for the experience of the love of God. Then again, via route D, there are more obscured encounters from the external 'Objective God Object' that are recognizably God, but in the form of previously formed endopsychic representations formed in the early infancy. The spiritual and the psychological, the real and the imagined are inseparably bound and located within the same mind in the same intermediate space and subject to the same processes! It is impossible however, to try to peel back the anthropocentric aspects of the God representations to gain a 'more accurate' perspective, of the Objective God. Maturation over time would surely also enable these to become more adequate if the same image-shedding process holds that operates with parental objects.

The critical issue is that counter to the view that noumenal presence is unknowable to the creature, Spero holds that the inward representation of God extends to the outward real object. We who believe we know God, not only know just our representations of God, but we only know this Being by means of the representation. Such knowledge is *both* subjective and objective. This is how the revelation of God can fall within the realm of personal experience. The subjective is not the origin of the Object but affects the 'shape' in which it is discerned once recognized by faith.³⁹

³⁹ This is not to say that God is not above and beyond such representations. While He can be inferred from the belief system articulated he is unknowable both in his essence while being both behind and beyond them. So also Meissner, "The God Question in Psychoanalysis", 225



When imaginative scriptural preaching connects with a believing ear, this 'striking of a chord' that what could be happening here is that the presented present images of God's nature or work, or his nature known through his work, is recognized deeply, or in sync with the God representations already resident within the boundary of the self. How else may the message revealed be recognized as from God unless this God is already in some ways known? That is, they have the compelling resonance with Truth, or, be generated at the same level real of ontological reality.

Theological Appraisal of an Object Relations Ontology

It is likely that Christo-monists like Barth, would have been wary of Spero's view of the origins of God objects. He rejected any sense of innate capacity for religiosity in humanity in reaction to the likes of Schleiermacher and Kant. Humanity has no capacity to know God apart from God's word as the human cannot achieve a revelation of the Lord.⁴⁰ Barth was adamant that there is no centre within the human that is the province of 'religion'.⁴¹ Barth is correct though to warn of the danger of thinking we can construct an adequate knowledge of God inferentially from internal, mystical images. Strictly speaking though, Spero is discriminating between those God objects which are purely projections of the infant's experiences say of parent figures and the reality of genuine revelatory encounter with God, even via a mediated version. This is not to locate the religious sensibility within some aspect of the self, although the end-product, the recognition of the objective God is subjective. This is within the self in the sense that God objects of more or less adequate quality are located in the perceptive intermediate space along with all other God objects. The initiative of God mediating some aspect of his nature to the recipient even via infantile God images is still the sovereign initiative of God.

This should sound somewhat familiar to those acquainted with the theology of the Reformers and Paul. The reformers linked Romans 1.19,20 and Romans 2.15 though exegesis does not strictly demand this identification. Both texts affirm that although it is of no saving benefit to the sinner, something of God's eternal qualities or His law can be acknowledged by all even if not attributed to him. The knowledge of God in the external world is only made possible through an innate knowledge. And this is actual rather than just potential knowledge. God is revealing his infinite Glory through creation and conscience.

More recently, Pannenberg, in distinction from Barth, actually postulated the awareness of God in the infant to the developmental experiences of infancy. The former is non-thematic associated with raw feelings of desire or non-desire, but then becomes thematised in the experience of the conscience.⁴² Pannenberg here echoes Spero's perspective but from a theological reflection. Initially, this world and even the presence of God or awareness of the infinite is not able to be apprehended or, differentiated from the self. However, object-related feelings are always mediated by perceptions of objects. But from the very first we have a sense of the "silent infinity of reality beyond our control that constantly presents to us a mystery".⁴³ Making sense of such feelings is not strictly part of that experience but later reflection. This knowledge though is still not just an aptitude as in the sense of

⁴⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol 1.1, 221, 232

⁴¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol 1.1, 270-272

⁴² W Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, (Trans. G Bromiley, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988), 112.

⁴³ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 113

Schleiermacher's religious consciousness. The knowledge of God from all his works (Rom 1.20) is not as innate as that of the conscience (Rom 2.15). But this knowing, while not the same as saving grace, has the potential through the use of reason, to result in either worship, or, idolatry. This also suggests that the essence of this human sinfulness amounts to a sort of narcissistic turn whereby one contents oneself with one's own endopsychic images of God rather than the objective God who resides far beyond yet revealed through those images.

Imagination, Maturation and Sanctification

This then raises the issue as to how the God images of a preacher and the engaged congregation may be refined over time. As noted already, Winnicott held that transitional objects drop away eventually in a process of decommissioning. Values and beliefs are transitional and liable to be revised as one matures emotionally. Meissner also sees these images are idiosyncratic being derived from a variety of sources but must be sustained by "larger cognitive schemata" shaped by the creedal society that shares the same belief in the revelation of a really existing God.⁴⁴ Spero likens this object shedding to the impact of reliable therapeutic counselling enabling a person to disassemble themselves of God objects that are not adequate, or come to be recognized as having been transferred in appropriately from other contexts onto God.

While Spero's approach tends to dissolve special revelation into general as his metanarrative implies a view of the cosmos as constructed upon the halakhic template of Torah rather than one where special revelation of a sovereign, self-revealing God is a new, and necessary source of genuine illumination alongside general revelation. Spero says,

I believe that the closer one moves toward working with unfettered halakhic structures [in therapy] which, ideally presumes a nonpathological state of mind-the closer one is to the person's representation of the objectifiable aspects of God. It will come as no surprise to the reader to learn that this folding-back of displaced and distorted images, revealing the record of a more objective perception that has taken place simultaneously, is the lynchpin of the therapeutic process.⁴⁵

God does not become more mysterious but more accurately discerned. Pannenberg also likens this phenomenon to the metaphor a 'question' to which we are referred to as the basis for life.

But this question only arises when there is a dissatisfaction with the finite thing of worldly experience. And it arises once the content of experience are clearly differentiated from one another and the self and known in their finitude.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Meissner, "The God Question in Psychoanalysis", 322.

⁴⁵ Spero, *Object Relations as Psychological Structures*, 146

⁴⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Vol 1*, 116

Both Pannenberg and Meissner also see this 'folding-back' as a natural maturational phenomena that could be assisted by the counselling experience and is reinforced by the believers creedal community. This could also lead to a more universalistic approach to revelation that could diminish the need for special revelation for the knowledge of God,⁴⁷ or, downplay a distinct role for the saving power of the Gospel (Rom. 1.16-17). The apostles viewed the gift of saving faith must be obtained from without and cannot be constructed in its material content from within the self (1 Peter 1.2, 2 Peter 1.19, John 5.39). Instead the work and witness of the Spirit of God within them draws a believer to the word that is the Scriptures with the same attractive power, as toward the Word that is Christ (Gal. 1.16, Eph. 1.17, Jn. 14.26, 16.13, 1Cor. 2.10-16).

But by the same token, a deocentric view of the Gospel does not necessitate the abandoning or bypassing of object relational aspects of cognitive conceptualization of the work of Christ in salvation. But it is going to imply that internalised God Images will be fallible filters of illumination as it is those through which the revelation of Christ is discerned. Even if there can be a movement in God Imaging that is analogous to a movement toward less pathological states of mind, one cannot ever have more than a partial and mediated glimpse of the glory of God', only ever approximating a clear depiction of the interpersonal dynamics involved in Christ's saving love. By this interpretation the potency of Christ's capacity to effect his saving purposes is surely going to be affected by the experience of the potency of the hearers' own parent figures and we may even say the image of the preacher as spokesperson for God in the mind of the hearer. The displacement of such god images that originate from a less than adequate holding environment and which are then projected onto Christ must eventually be set aside. The actual justifying Word of grace must be both distinguished from these while still being the means by which the underlying deocentric origins of the Word are recognized!

Conclusion

So, what is happening when imaginative preaching 'strikes a chord' within the hearts of the hearers? A view informed by an object relating perspective would have it that the Word of God encountered in the preached word resonates constructively rather than destructively with the Christ who dwells within the believer and the more adequate of the internalized god representations through which His way and work is imagined. This is what gives that chord 'the ring of truth'. The analogies and images of the preacher that have arisen out of their own soul searching meditation of the text evokes their own personal experience of God. The very same contours of the text that disturb the preacher in preparation enable a discrimination to occur between inadequate God images that need shedding and that enlightened knowing that comes via the Spirit in the light of the word. But if this preaching is to have the ring of truth

⁴⁷ A direction Pannenberg is comfortable to move; Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 118, 314f

about it then there has to be an aspect of the new imagination to prompt the sense of personal recognition in the first place; one that correlates with what was already present in the hearer too - subjective God images through which the objective God has formerly revealed himself even from our shared infancy.

Two issues converge here from different disciplines. Theologically there is but one Revealing Spirit though as many representations as there are interactions with parents and other internalized objects. In an Object Relations perspective, intrapsychic reality is nonetheless reality within the reality of God.⁴⁸ Intuitively speaking, one can see here the potential for preaching which is simultaneously faithful and imaginative to be both spiritually illuminating, even reformative and simultaneously, personally, integrating. Fragments of unresolved personal history can be surfaced, memories dreams and latent theologies, both the precursors to divine encounters, once abandoned can be reconnected and reorganized as object relational meanings intertwine with the regenerative special revelation of the Word of God so preached into the present.

The preacher who grasps a shaft of gracious light in their textual play and then transforms this into a set of related symbols to share with the hearer is taking advantage of the fact that there is a transitional space where the anthropocentric overlaps with the deocentric experience at the boundary of the self of the hearers. The hearers of an evocative sermon are then given a transitional object that is supplied with significance by the hearers and which occupies the psychic space between the external and internal world. As with created reality this transitional object of sermon experiencing conjures up images in the hearer that have continuity with early transitional experience. Various God objects collide in this zone of transference and those which have more or less veracity or merely endopsychic projections that have been re-introjected are able to be decommissioned in favour of that which tallies with the speech of God mediated via the Scriptures. Ironically, as the imagination of the preacher stimulates the imaginings of the hearers they themselves are co-constructing the imagery being generated.

They may also feel somewhat at one with the preacher as the patient sometimes feels to be with their therapist. Sometimes the experiences related by the preacher feel as if they were their own. Much of what the hearer thinks they know according to this model is generated from their own inner world. What they suppose they know about the preacher's world is in fact reflections of themselves. But this is still a necessary step in discarding distorted images of

⁴⁸ That is according to Spero. This is a major 'bone of contention' between Spero and his critics Rizzuto and Meissner who view such dogmatic assertions as beyond the province of the object relations theoretical grid. (See again Meissner's *The God Question in Psychoanalysis*). This is due largely to the proper respect for the boundaries of the counselling relationship. But that boundary is not pertinent to this context which invites dogmatics to the table for the sake of theological reflection. Hence Spero's deocentric contribution is welcome at this point.

self and God, analogous to decommissioning the imaginary friends of infancy, and developing a more authentic spiritual life.

Homiletic Implications

This exploration then has key implications for the mindset of the preacher in both preparation and delivery.

Preparation

The first implication of this approach then is that a sermon has to be 'discovered' by the preacher through deliberate imaginative processes that transcend just grammatical mastery of a text. The preacher cannot know in advance what turns or tensions will arise as they enter the world of a text. One curiosity, one 'boundary-crossing' action of Christ, even one Old Covenant 'Jihad' can be the source of a whole sermon and the difference between a message being a predictable lecture upon a text as opposed to a transformative pastoral encounter which resonates with the God images embedded within the minds of the hearers. The adequate preacher must stay enmeshed with such textual peculiarities and respect them as deliberately scripted features of a unique text rather than flatten them with some familiar preaching tradition or shared dogmatic iron. Preaching on a similar theme or more familiar proposition will not do when this text has come to be preached to this people in this time.

The good-enough preacher, like the adequate-mother, functions so as to assist others in sustaining the sort of psychic pain that leads to a more stable Spiritual life, who are able to live by faith in a less than perfect opaque world as with a tension riddled text. An adequate preacher refuses to 'soften the blow', avoid the scandalous in the text nor domesticate the freedom of God who pre-scripted the accounts within it. By rising to the challenge of healthy object relating in the preacher's own sermon preparation demonstrates that these momentary frustrations are tolerable and in the preaching event model the sort of faith that can be resilient within the vagaries of adult life.

Likewise, a preacher may be able to plan out their pastoral week but they cannot plan out a sermon as like that of an essay in seminary and then later add entertaining lubricants to keep the audience engaged in the underlying lecture. Yet, some preaching primers advocate just that!⁴⁹ This tradition of sermon construction gives the impression that a tolerable sermon can be assembled automatically upon an exegetical chassis without any thought given to its dramatic effect. Illustrations and applications are 'bolted on' as later accessories in a series of assembly-line steps. Ironically, while rightly saluting careful exegesis, such approaches to

⁴⁹ See for instance the order of the chapters reflects this attitude in Bryan Chappell's *Christ Centred Preaching*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1994 (especially pp. 146-150).

sermon development impose a chronological order upon the message, so when the preacher has 'got through' producing this week's exegetical essay the communicative task is presumed to be complete.

But sermon discovery is emotionally-taxing work. This sort of preparation of a message with transformative potential is a more messy and unpredictable affair. Meaning relevance and imperatives come as hunches, in instances in the shape of moods, images and recollections deep within us. Like Jacob's night encounter with the mysterious wrestling partner the effective preacher cannot give up the struggle with this form of the Word 'until You bless me' (Gen 32.26). A good enough preacher cannot serve their congregation well until they themselves are first blessed through the 'overcoming' of the text with a new homiletic form and rhetorical focus. This is the core craft of the preacher.

Limitations

Dykstra was concerned that the transitional space in the preaching hearing event is truncated by the dogmatic instructor. Such an authoritative teacher may even reactivate archaic images of a parent who forbids free playful thinking. The associated feelings of frustration generated by such an approach could divert persons from the religious quest of knowing God for themselves or ever sorting through their stock of God Images. This censoring of imagination negates both resonance with the adequate and dissonance with the inadequate image entirely on the basis of the senses generated. If pathogenic images of God need to be exposed in counselling through the self-discovery of the patient,⁵⁰ the preacher has to likewise respect the limits of their craft, not insisting that the hearer conceptualise God's person or works in the same way as they do. It is up to the hearer to engage in their own inner dialogue between the God-representations of the preacher, their formative tradition and their internalised images.

During the preaching event, the sermon becomes a transitional object in the hand of the hearer if it is to facilitate divine communication. It takes on a life of its own and the reorienting process has to be now entrusted to the meeting of the new image-bearers and the Spirit at the boundary of the world that is simultaneously external and internal and more besides. Despite the sometimes distorted images imbibed from within this broken world, this is necessary for an explicit awareness of the God.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Meissner, "The God Question in Psychoanalysis", 229

⁵¹ This posture, 'leaving well enough alone', validates the move toward the audience that was central to the non-authoritative posture of Craddock and other proponents of inductive preaching.

Reparation

The preaching-hearing encounter is more complex than an intellectual injection of truths by the learned into the ignorant. Both parties bring their own preconscious canvases into the preaching moment. This is analogous to the therapist-client encounter. We not only bring to an explanation of the chosen text's meaning, but our own endoscopic God images that have been catalysed to the surface of awareness. There are clear parallels in the transferences that occur between the client and therapist that occur between the congregation and the preacher. In the same way the audience can use the imaginative preacher who in preaching reveals their own inner imaginative prior play with the text as a patient does with their therapist. This interplay enables the patient to surrender their spurious version of reality filled with distorted objects or heretical extremes.⁵²

Within the holding environment of the therapy room a patient also has the capacity to confer divine qualities upon the image of the therapist and conversely, the therapist has the ability to discern the qualities so transferred upon them. It may even be possible for the therapist to note the influence of a third divine party in the cathartic moment.⁵³ If preachers adopt the theological conviction that the listeners actually have a prior innate knowledge of God, then these representations may be working analogously to those projected onto the therapist in the therapeutic session. Displacements and projections from lower order object representations may also be projected onto the preacher, though the preacher would not necessarily discern the content of these diverse projections from the distance of pulpit to pew. Even so, when the preacher speaks God is heard speaking; and that speech comes encased in a unique human personality with its own stock of human imagery. While being life stories or curiosities of the preacher, they are somehow accessible to the hearers as their own as their own imaginations are triggered into action. A 'successful' preaching moment in terms of congregational maturation is when the hearer has been able not so much to appreciate the artistry of the preacher, but have been so stimulated in their own imaginations to playfully re-symbolise the preacher's imaginative materials themselves.

At such a point, a preacher may discern though that a space has been created where the congregation is transacting with a present Third party. Much more is happening here than merely an assent to a shared creed. And at such a point the interest of the maturing congregation has moved far beyond merely appreciating the craft of the preacher toward apprehending their God even mediated through parallel imaginative work. That mystery of that 'silent infinitude which resides beyond our control' is recognizable in the collective

⁵² Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures*, 150

⁵³ Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures*, 151-152

groaning that is 'too deep for words'. The mature preacher understands that their own role, like the therapist, is only instrumental.

So, it is imperative then that preachers appreciate what is at stake when they 'put in the hard yards' to make the text their own subjective-object. They cannot invite others into a shared set of images that are merely correct dogmatically but have not been somehow 'destroyed and remade' into another meaningful synthesis for the preacher first. The realities to which the Scriptures speak must be made their own.⁵⁴ They cannot assist in the displacement processes of the congregation if the work of God in the formative years of their hearers is not respected nor due regard held for the ontological dimensions of the divine-human encounter that occurs in 'good enough' holding environment that is the regular preaching event. Such preaching begins at the point the preacher appreciates afresh that their own imagination is a theologically critical pastoral activity. This capacity is more than just a raw ability but involves a whole way of living for the preacher; living within a 'subjunctive mood',⁵⁵ becoming sensate to the textured nature of daily life seen through the eyes of faith concurrently with a living One who has been patiently revealing Himself through the object relating of his children with the materials of the created order since their shared infancy with a view to this sort of other-worldly encounter. This shared developmental history must be taken seriously. Despite the mundane materials out of which the preaching moment is constructed, such blessed imaginative preaching is, nonetheless, a present and partial foretaste of the unmediated glory to come.

⁵⁴ And this is a reason why the person who downloads other's sermons and preaches them as their own constructions is actually defrauding their audience at a deep level.

⁵⁵ Carter-Florence, 123f

About the author

Jeff Pugh is a practical theologian who having pastored several Baptist Churches in the 1980s and 1990s then was on the faculty of ACT seminaries in three states while often having a role as a consultant to denominational or NGO bodies in organizational culture change. In recent years his main role has been in developing a postgraduate research school with the Melbourne School of Theology and is currently serving this year as Principle of the SILA language development school associated with the Melbourne School of Theology. His research interests focus mainly upon positive organisational culture change and effective homiletics.