

'Heidelberger sermon analysis and African preaching'

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**Introduction to Prof. Nhiwatiwa's lecture on African preaching.
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Prof. Nhiwatiwa is homiletician in Mutate, Zimbabwe.**

Introduction

As I have been living in an African country - in the Ivory Coast, a former French colony in West Africa, to be precise - I am very eager to hear prof. Nhiwatiwa's lecture on African preaching. And I am glad that he asked me to make some preliminary remarks to his lecture on the Heidelberg method of sermon analysis. In Adzopé, the town where I lived, there were two Christian churches one Roman Catholic and one Protestant. Now when I wanted to understand the hymns and the sermon I went to the Roman Catholic church because their services were held in French in the very neat and fixed order of the Holy Mass. But when I wanted to experience the Holy Spirit active in the African mind and soul I went to the Protestant church. Their services were much longer, much livelier, sometimes chaotic and held in the vernacular language *Attié*. With my very limited knowledge of *Attié* I did not understand much of it, but what I did feel was that my whole being was addressed and engaged here, not only my reason. I will always remember the tremendous difference between the western experience and the African experience of the Gospel in these two churches. Somehow I felt that in the African experience God's universal grace is working in a mysteriously deep reality of good and evil that transcends every Western rationalization and its theological models. And so I learned to discern the hermeneutic character of western theology.

Now the Heidelberg method of sermon analysis is a very theological one, based on the dialectic theology of Karl Barth. It is extensively discussed in *Die Predigtanalyse als Weg zur Predigt*, edited in Tübingen in 1989 by Rudolph Bohren and Klaus Peter Jörns. In our discussion of the method I will reverse the order in which the method is presented in the chapter called *Thesen zur Predigtanalyse*. I will start with the method, then the object, then the goal, then the necessity and finally the presuppositions of the method. And I hope by doing this I will lead the way to Prof. Nhiwatiwa's insights on African preaching.

The Heidelberg method of sermon analysis

The method of the analysis

The analyst reads the sermon as a potential hearer and introduces his or her hearing experience into the analysis. First impression and edification of the analyst are constituting factors of the analysis, that will also follow the linguistic signals that the preacher gives in the sermon

(like grammar, outline, conditional and modal sentences, negations and the like). Now the gifts and the defects of the preacher come to the fore. Defective language refers to defective theology or other existential defects within the preacher. The analysis however has to transcend the borders of pure linguistic analysis as a closed system and become interpretation. To prepare preacher and sermon for their 'job' analysis and interpretation have to be carried out in the Spirit of Jesus Christ and in the emancipated communion of the congregation.

The object of the analysis

Each sermon has four sources: language related to the Name of God, language of the Bible, personal language of the preacher and cultural language. Every sermon combines and mixes these four different languages in its own unique way which forms the object of the analysis. The fourfold language mixture indicates the problem of 'sermon language': the analysis distinguishes the languages and investigates their mutual justification. The preacher is the one who mixes the languages, who expresses himself in the sermon with this mixture. So what is his language and is the language he thinks to speak the same language that is understood by his congregation? How are the congregation, the world and the preacher himself featuring in the sermon? Does the preacher speak the language of his time and culture or does he only think he does? He may for instance emphasize biblical language and lose the intimate connection with the actual experiences of the congregation. This intimacy can only be obtained in a powerful sermon by a good mixture of the four languages. Every reduction to one of the four languages leads to impotence, loss of meaning, disappointment.

The goal of the analysis

The analysis is interested in the future of the sermon and with it in God's own future, in the praise of good preaching by a self-conscious and emancipated congregation. This spiritual state of the congregation however is directly related to the emancipation of the preacher to whom the analysis extends its pastoral care. Therefore the analysis is directed towards a renewal of the sermon so that its proclamation becomes more genuine in terms of prophecy based on the Scriptures as a whole. Good preaching must be able to proclaim what the Risen Lord says and does in our own time and defend the Bible text as a whole against the religions. And so the analysis also helps the congregation to judge the sermon and apply what it says in daily life in order to improve communal life within the congregation. The goal of this interpretation is the verification of God's Word and the continuation of the history of salvation in a renewed proclamation of the sermon.

The necessity of the analysis

In the Preacher of Nazareth Word and Person were One. He had full power and acted as the Sovereign of the Scriptures. Now every sermon loses language because the preacher is not one with God's Word and because he is not a sovereign with regard to the Scriptures. This loss of language expresses itself in the difference between meaning and saying, between conscious and unconscious dogmatics, between articulated meaning and body language. In this difference the Name of God becomes an empty formula, the Scriptures become dead syllables, the hearer becomes the hollow idol. With his lips the preacher speaks a different language than he speaks with his heart that belongs to the heretic world of his unconscious lusts.

Now since Pentecost the Holy Spirit speaks of the great deeds of the Lord in a polyphonic way. Sermons lose language because they pay too much attention to details of the passed or the

present time instead of to the wide variety of the great deeds of God Himself as described in his Word. And so the canalization of the 'flow of words' that we call sermon in pulpit rhetoric stabilizes and even justifies the immaturity of the congregation and troubles the rich proclamation of God's Word. Analysis and interpretation of the sermon will therefore help the *hearer* to let the sermon speak again, but now in *his* own unique way and - in so doing - regain the original polyphony of the Scriptures. Speaking of loss or gain of language still leaves the question unanswered with regard to the spirit that dominates the sermon as a mixture of languages. And so the analysis not only distinguishes the languages that are active in the sermons but also the spirits they bring along, because the sermon - as a human flow of words - can be a prelude but also an obstacle to the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The presuppositions of the analysis

The sermon tells about the One-Who-Came, gives witness to His Presence and prophecies about His future. The Holy Scriptures - Old Testament and New Testament - give language to the sermon. The preacher takes up the Word for himself and speaks with his whole body. The sermon is addressed to a concrete congregation or to a certain form of publicity which language the preacher speaks or is supposed to speak. In its turn this concrete congregation is part of a society whose language it speaks. And so - given all these different contexts - the sermon is directed to a group of people that 'has no borders' or is able to transcend them in order to reach the universal love of Lord Jesus.

Heidelberg sermon analysis and African preaching

Reduction

The goals of the Heidelberg efforts - emancipation of preachers and congregations, prophecy based on the Scriptures as a whole, propagation of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God - are important and touch believers in their very heart. There are only a few problems regarding the procedures that lead towards these goals. The idealistic presupposition that the sermon addresses a group with no borders becomes very problematic in multi-cultural setting, where the borders are real and where it is deeply felt that the different languages express different cultures.

When we speak in such circumstances of 'language' this means that the wide variety of concrete vernacular languages is reduced to the very abstract and philosophical concept 'language'. But this philosophical reduction is not the only reductive movement that is performed in the Heidelberg method of sermon analysis. There is also a theological one. I asked myself: how is it possible, that with a very limited knowledge of vernacular religious language I did experience the active presence and grace of the Holy Spirit engaging me rationally, emotionally and existentially in that Protestant Church in Adzopé? Apparently the Kingdom of the Lord can not be reduced to mere language and to the thought patterns and cultural models that have developed in an intimate relation with this language and with which reality as a whole - also beyond the borders of the human realm - is interpreted. Nevertheless this reductive movement is also active in the presuppositions and their further elaboration in the Heidelberg sermon analysis where language plays the central role.

If the One-Who-Came, His presence and future depend on language then the question can be raised if not the total divine reality which we humans can never know completely is reduced to human reality in which all speaking of God is per definition loss of language. Olav Skjevesland notices a 'paralyzing speechlessness' in sermons (p.119), but I would ask: is the statement of this embarrassment not related to the very reductive movement in the presuppositions and their elaboration of the analysis itself? Of course we live in a broken reality and no human being or preacher is one with the Word and with God, but when this is our focus and becomes the justification of the analysis, the analysis is led more by negativity more than by God's grace.

In Western philosophy reduction is a very sophisticated tool to interpret reality. In Husserl's phenomenology it is the driving motor. At the end Husserl concluded that the whole interpretation of reality can be reduced to the intentionality of the philosopher, who is only responsible to himself. In the reductive movement 'the other' finally disappears and the self is made absolute. And so the real danger for the Heidelbergers is that the own theological model, the own - German or Western - language, the own sophisticated method of sermon analysis and with it all the other - let's say - Western cultural presuppositions are taken for granted. Then the analysis is getting an absolute status, immune for shocks coming from the outside, only responsible to itself. Of course the analysis aims at conquering the abyss between broken and healed reality, between the perversity of the preacher and the integrity of the Lord and His Word. But it is not at all clear how the analysis itself is subject to this lack of unity it disputes, how the struggle of good and bad is raging within its own quarters. For as far as I know only Klaus Peter Jörns raises explicitly questions of this order. How can we meet - he asks - the very attraction of this sort of repression that we analyze in others in our own interference with sermons as analysts ourselves? (p.173)

Amplification

So I would like to plead for a reversal of the procedure. I know very well that what is at stake in such a reversal is Barth's theology. Of course Barth is right in asserting that the Word precedes all human understanding. But with Ricoeur I would say that the basic entity of language that precedes all understanding is not the word but the sentence. And the linguistic sentence combines contrasting and colliding elements as verb and noun, subject and object, event and structure, time and system. So the first step in overcoming borders is to recognize and respect them. In stead of starting with boundless divine reality which transcends all human understanding we could at least be so modest to agree that our theology is limited human interpretation of divine reality which can not be known restlessly by whatever method of analysis. And then we will not focus on the loss of language, because we lack the criteria to measure this loss. No, we will start in the human reality with a clear distinction - which is lacking in the Heidelberg method - of the different sorts of analysis we are working with.

We could start with a linguistic analysis of the sermon text, then proceed to a more hermeneutic analysis of the relation between the sermon and the Bible text, which could lead us to a psychoanalytical analysis of the preacher, which would lead us in the realms of culture, ecclesiology and theology. Every step in this procedure would mean a gain of language in stead of a loss of language. We will only have to trust more in God's grace that is active in the guidance of the Holy Spirit leading us to truth, justice and love than in our own culturally determined concepts. In this way reality is not reduced to the controlling language of the ones in power, but is language the gateway we pass to reach reality in its bottomless depths also beyond cultural religious or other human borders and meet our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And this meeting for example with the many new and challenging African theologies could even change our own theological presuppositions. When we simply reverse the sequence of the Heidelberg method of sermon analysis, it is a powerful instrument to meet people within and beyond our own borders and to meet God's eternal unbound love.

Conclusion

Is not for Western listeners an African language as strange and culturally distant as the Hebrew language in the Old Testament or as Paul's language in the New Testament? And yet the abyss was conquered by the Holy Spirit and the Gospel prospered all over the world. At least that is what I experienced in that little Protestant Church in Adzopé and that is what I would pray for to happen in our own *Societas Homiletica*. And we could start right here and now by listening with an open heart and a loving mind to Prof. Nhiwatiwa's story on African preaching. Let us consider his non-Western background as pure gain of language which is meant to alter and enrich our own language leading the way to the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank you for your attention.

Jan Chr. Vaessen