

THEOLOGIA PRACTICA

Literáty Zoltán*

Budapest/Érdliget

After Half a Century.

Evaluation of the New Homiletic in 2021

Half a century ago a tiny homiletical book was published in the United States that proved to be a landmark in the history of homiletics. The title was: “As One Without Authority”, and its author was Fred B. Craddock. Lose suggests:

“Next to the 16th century, the 20th has probably seen a greater interest in the renewal and revival of preaching than any other. In the second half of the century, especially, preachers benefited from a creative explosion of available homiletical methods.”¹

So fifty years ago the theological-communicational system of this new homiletical movement was set in this rather short book of Craddock, and it started to be distributed widely in the United States. This year, in 2021 this book is 50 years old, so the time is ripe to draw some conclusions on the so called New Homiletic movement.

If we want to understand the New Homiletic, firstly we have to go back to the academic dialogue of the late 60^s and early 70^s. The concept of narrative paradigm was an answer to the view of science in the seventies. In other words, according to Thomas Kuhn,² the solid structure of any science is indicated by generally accepted paradigms. Researchers of communication also tried to define such a paradigm, which perfectly explains the behaviour of communication, and therefore provides a solid basis for the theories of communication. In narrative

* Literáty Zoltán, husband, father of four children, Reformed minister in Érdliget, docent at Károli University. Born in Transcarpathia (Ukraine), graduated in Csenger, got ministerial degree in Budapest, scholarship researcher in Ede, Belfast and Utrecht, guestlecturer in Thessaloniki and Belfast. Has several homiletical articles written in Hungarian and in English. He is a member of the International Board of the Societas Homiletica.

¹ Lose, David J.: Whither Hence, New Homiletic. Collected papers of annual meeting of Academy of Homiletics, November 30 – December 2 2000, (255–266) 255.

² Kuhn, Thomas S.: *The structure of scientific revolutions*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London 1970.

discourse Walter Fisher introduced the concept of narrative paradigm.³ According to his interpretation, all forms of communication which affect our intellect have to be understood as a story, which is shaped by history, culture and character. Fisher claimed that besides didactic or descriptive communication, narrative communication had a basic importance. Thus, he suggests among other things that narrative paradigm should not be approached as special rhetoric, but as a fundamental one, on which the entire rhetoric can be built.⁴ His main work *Human Communication as Narration* begins with a quotation from Scripture: “in the beginning was the word (Logos)”. As he explains, the Greek word means an event, argument, discourse, principle, concept, thought, in other words, all the forms of communication. According to him, in those times imagination and thought were not separated. A special usage can be observed in philosophical writings, where the meaning of Logos moves towards thought and assertion. As a result, imagination, aesthetics and art are of secondary importance. Tales and stories do not fit pure logic, as they only affect sentiments; they become tools of delusion rather than those of noble persuasion. This struggle between pure logic and sentimental effect, rationality and emotions not only characterised the classical age, but has continued to do so ever since in our culture and in homiletics, too.

Moving one step ahead, according to this paradigm, New Homiletic was not just a theory, not just a branch of homiletical suggestions in a critical period of Christian communication, but it was set as a new paradigm. The point of this new paradigm has been well defined. It represents a totally radical shift away from the rational and propositional logics of argument as the basis of sermon invention and arrangement.⁵

A variety of new compositional logic has been offered as a new paradigm, usually called narrative paradigm. Narrative is a much more general category than the study of fairy tales and short stories. Besides structural analysis of texts it is also applied in other disciplines. It is characteristic mainly of the social sciences (history, philosophy, sociology, politics, psychology and recently also in theology) whose object is of narrative nature. This means that in these various sciences similar phenomena occur in relation to the nature of the discipline and their discursive strategies. These common phenomena, with parallel rules, form the scientific structures of narrative, can also be applied in theological investigations.

³ Fisher, Walter R.: *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia S.C. 1987.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵ Reid, Robert Stephen: Postmodernism and the function of the New Homiletic in post-christendom congregations. In: *Homiletic* 20. (1995/2), (1–13) 7.

So my first observation is that exploring the narrative nature of thinking and communication has given us new aspects to evaluate Christian sermons.

This source of tension which occurs in narrative theology has its effect on the discussions in narrative homiletics. The first question that we encounter is whether content and form are separable or inseparable. According to the New Homiletic, content cannot be separated from the form. Craddock states in his earlier cited book: “method is message: form and content are of a piece [...]”⁶ Where did this idea arrive from in New Homiletic?

“During his sabbatical at Tübingen and its Institute for Hermeneutics in 1968–69, Craddock was greatly influenced by the scholarship of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs. He adapted their new – theology of speaking (i.e., the New Hermeneutic) to a new – theology of preaching.”⁷

Biblical stories are not simply illustrations attached to a thought, but they are forms of expression. Also in preaching, stories have greater relevance than secondary illustration tools. A narration cannot become ideological if it is more than the illustration of the topic. If a narration is merely an illustration, it is difficult to liberate it from allegorical approaches. However, instead of allegory, a metaphor is capable of securing that activity and pointing beyond itself and at the same time secures the relevance of the form.⁸

So, what is the difference between illustration in a sermon and narrative paradigm? The effect of narrative theology on narrative homiletics is often misunderstood. When we speak about something or someone (I mean we speak in descriptive style), we may think that we are preaching narratively. However, it is just the opposite. Description does not necessarily mean narration. Argument often uses the tool of description (as in classical rhetoric). Narrative homiletics thinks in terms of events. If in a sermon God is not merely the object – or sometimes the subject – of description, but begins to “happen”, i.e. becomes part of the story, this is when we can talk of narrative preaching, and about the maximum effect of the pathos. Narrative preaching discloses what happens in the presence of God. For this reason the form of narrative preaching is multicoloured. It cannot be compared to the two and a half millennia-old propositional speech of Aristotle. The emphasis of narrative preaching is not based on didactics, but on history itself, or on its relation to history, in other words what the story induces in us.

⁶ Craddock, Fred B.: *As One Without Authority*. Chalice Press, Vendor 2001, 18.

⁷ Dawn, Ottoni-Wilhelm: New Hermeneutic, New Homiletic, and New Directions: An U.S. – North American Perspective. In: *Homiletic* 35. (2010/1), (17–31), 19.

⁸ Vályi Nagy Ágnes: Narratív teológia, narratív igehirdetés. In: *Théma* 1. (1999/2–3), (4–12) 7.

We may open or close ourselves, we may become more daring or timid, or we may receive consolation or get distressed. Our faith is not articulated for ourselves in concepts, but in events, especially in our own experience.

To achieve this, it is not sufficient to simply use topics illustrated by analogies, short narratives or examples. The New Homiletic regarded the whole sermon as a full plot based on events, where the totality of time, characters and happenings bring a complete message to the audience. The New Homiletic analogues became the vehicle of the message. They are no longer illustrations, but they are the message themselves. A chain of stories or a longer story has a plot with succeeding moments or moves, a whole movement. It includes the message in itself. Such complete narratives can visualize the whole Christian narrative, the story of Jesus even on a small scale for the listener, by means of which the listener can take part in the narrative.

The thoughts of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs encouraged American homileticians to recognize that language by nature is powerful. While according to the Old Homiletic, language just expresses or signifies meaning, the new movement was saying: it creates it. According to Craddock's famous metaphor, the sermon gives an opportunity for the preacher and the listeners to make a journey together in experiencing the gospel. Instead of explaining texts or arguing a point of Scripture, the preacher may invite listeners into an encounter with God's Word in the sermon. The method is the inductive way of preaching. He argues that God did the same, when the incarnation happened.⁹

The discourse in the New Homiletic movement mainly concerned the role of the listener. According to Thomas Long, homileticians and preachers were giving increasing attention to the listeners,¹⁰ they turned to the listeners in order to understand the congregation in real life. The goal according to Ronald J. Allen was that

“The preacher who has a sense of the patterns of thought, feeling, and behaviour in the congregation can develop the sermon to have an optimum opportunity to communicate with the congregation.”¹¹

Craddock states that the inductive approach of preaching

⁹ Craddock, Fred B.: *As One Without Authority*, 52. „The incarnation itself is an inductive method.”

¹⁰ Long, Thomas G.: *And How Shall They Hear? The Listener in Contemporary Preaching*. In: O'Day, Gail R. – Long, Thomas G. (eds.) *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*. Abingdon Press, Nashville 1993, (167–188) 167.

¹¹ Allen, Ronald J.: *The Turn to the Listener: A Selective Review of a Recent Trend in Preaching*. In: *Encounter* 64. (2003/2), 167–196.

“[...] respects the hearer as not only capable of but deserving the right to participate in that movement and arrive at a conclusion that is his own, not just the speaker’s.”¹²

So the main goal of the New Homiletic was to create an experience in the listener by a communicative event. Craddock goes back to Kierkegaard who suggested indirect persuasion¹³ that works through imagination.¹⁴ The role of this experiential and imaginative preaching was to be an evocative preaching. As Wilhelm-Ottoni says:

“Sermons were understood as capable of making their appeal not only through rational arguments but evocation, imagination, and addressing listeners’ emotional needs as well.”¹⁵

The aim of this preaching is to create an experience of the Word of God in listeners through their previous cognition. It is the meaning of evocative preaching.

To understand this concept of evocative preaching, we must go back a little in the history of American society. Professor Robert Wuthnow from Princeton University wrote in his famous book¹⁶ that just after the Second World War worship attendance in American society was growing, ecclesiastical optimism was really high, church was a “repository of values inherently of the highest good”, and religious education did its best to raise society by moral values.¹⁷ Fifteen years later all these had changed significantly. People were concerned much more about the huge problems of their society such as the Vietnam War, nuclear danger, racial problems and civil rights, social injustice, etc. The authority of the church and religious people was declining; church attendance was decreasing. The “media” revolution of the television found its place in the 60^s too.

Craddock arrived in such a context and suggested his solution. This solution seemed to be a communication one, but if we look at it on a deeper level, we will discover that it was a theological one. For many preachers who are engaged only superficially with approaches of New Homiletic, the question is one of communication. They think that postmodernity likes stories and narratives; therefore preachers will be popular if they start to use the same tools in the

¹² Craddock, Fred B.: *As One Without Authority*, 52.

¹³ Craddock, Fred B.: *Overhearing the Gospel. Revised and Expanded Edition*. Chalice Press, Saint Louis, MO 2002, 70.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁵ Dawn, Ottoni-Wilhelm: *op.cit.* 21.

¹⁶ Wuthnow, Robert: *The Restructuring of American Religions: Society and Faith Since World War II*. Studies in on Church and State. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1988.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

pulpit. The ultimate argument behind that approach is that Jesus himself used narratives and parables, so we should do the same and the problem is solved. But Craddock talks about more than this. If we look at his homiletic on a deeper level, he suggests analysing Jesus' method, not only his parables of the Kingdom of God. According to Craddock, Jesus used the narrative because he knew that his audience had knowledge of the Word of God, but they did not have the power to live by the Word of God. They knew much, but they did not live accordingly. So Jesus' new method was the narrative, but not in order to delight the listeners, I mean, the problem was not just a question of communication, but the question of the power of the Word. Jesus used narrative that could transfer the power of God from the ancient text to the contemporary listeners.

When Craddock published his book "Overhearing the Gospel" – the subtitle here is important: *Preaching and Teaching the Faith to Those who have already Heard* – he gives a new vision for 20th century homiletics. He cites Kierkegaard: "There is no lack of information in a Christian Land, something else is lacking..."¹⁸ The power raised by communication. From this point of view the question is more theological than just communication. Craddock offered this way of thinking for preaching in the 60^s–70^s in order to experience the power of the Word of God. He realised what Professor Robert Wuthnow said, that American society in the 60^s–70^s had an enormous basis of Christian knowledge but they were more interested in experiencing that basis. For example they wanted not just to know what justice is theoretically, but they really wanted to experience it in their social setting. As his first argument Craddock writes in his book that contemporary America (e.g. the Social Gospel Movement) needed: "Deeds not words."¹⁹ Listeners wanted not only to hear the sound of the Word, but they wanted to see the work of the Word. They "who have already known ... heard..."²⁰ were open to experience the power of the Word.

In its context we can understand well how the New Homiletic was interwoven with the culture of the post Second World War generation, but if we want to evaluate the New Homiletic we have to confirm that this movement was very sensitive to circumstances. There is no lack of information in the Christian Land... Is this true now for America? Or for Europe? It is a difficult question. I am not convinced, not just because Craddock said a few decades later that

¹⁸ Craddock, Fred B.: *As One Without Authority*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 6.

²⁰ Craddock, Fred B.: *Overhearing the Gospel*, viii.

“There is the lack of biblical knowledge among the listeners.”²¹ Moreover James Thompson declares also:

“Now people have little knowledge of biblical content. The present culture is increasingly post-Christian and unacquainted with Christian proclamation. We preach to congregations that are largely shaped by the values of a new pagan culture. [...] The biblical image of ‘exile’ accurately describes the place of the church in a culture that is characterized by consumer capitalism, moral relativism, and narcissism. The loss of the Christian society presents a special problem to the preacher, who must recognize that the current generation did not grow up in a world that was determined by a Christian ethos that provided common understandings of Christian morality. [...] We must learn once more how to proclaim the gospel to those who have not heard [...]”²²

In short, narrative and inductive preaching can work only on the basis of a solid Christian biblical knowledge of the listener, because the narrative in the present aims at evoking the theological metanarrative hidden in the ancient biblical text. This basic biblical knowledge is, however, not at hand, so the expressed narrative cannot find and hold on to the theological narrative in the text. It may delight the listener but it cannot evoke the experience of God.

Many of my students and some ministers frequently ask me if narrative preaching can be fruitful today in the Hungarian Reformed Church. Well, I think if the capability of the listeners is given – I mean the capability of connecting the present narrative and ancient metanarrative – anybody may use this way of preaching, if she or he is able to create it with high quality. But if the listeners do not possess basic biblical knowledge, it is better firstly to give them a secure teaching than narrative sermon. As Craddock stated it a few decades later: “Preachers have to help the people make connections, especially if they lack a metanarrative.”²³ Concluding this idea we may say that narrative preaching fits and functions best in a Christian context in which listeners are informed of the Christian heritage.

And finally I am going to comment on the non-authoritative way of the New Homiletic movement. Craddock said, imitating the words of Kierkegaard, “I speak as one without authority.”²⁴ Beside the listeners, the discourse of the New Homiletic was on the aesthetic dimension of preaching. Discussion of the form dominated

²¹ Craddock, Fred B.: *Inductive Preaching Renewed*. In: Wesley, Allen O. Jr. (ed.): *Renewed Homiletic*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2010, (40–55) 51.

²² Thompson, James: *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2001, 9–10.

²³ Craddock, Fred B.: *Inductive Preaching Renewed*, 53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

the New Homiletic. Because of the narrative paradigm, the majority of books and articles written under the umbrella of the New Homiletic treated only the aesthetic form: the narrative sermon, absolutely neglecting other forms of the Bible or Christian tradition. As I said previously, indirect communication needed something indirect in form, and the narrative form seemed to be perfect for an indirect style of preaching. This indirect preaching is a preaching “without authority” that focuses on the listener’s response rather than the truth of a given passage from Scripture. And the tension is found here between the aesthetics and the truth, in other words, between the form and the theology of preaching. This tension needs a solution, because the narrative form and the theological interpretation should constitute one and the same Word of God. The main example of a solution for us is given in the Scripture. The narrative stands at the centre of the biblical faith, but this faith needs concrete conceptualization in other forms, e.g. Paul’s epistles in reasoning and argumentative forms. These letters of Paul certainly do not lack apostolic authority. According to the apostle we can observe that preaching operates with authority, because the gospel makes claims on the listeners’ lives.

So what can we say if we try to understand Craddock’s 50 year old approach to non-authoritative preaching in the Hungarian context? Firstly, we can agree with him that the preacher does not have any additional authority originating from his office or tradition, etc. Secondly, it is not true that preaching has only so much authority as it can evoke by experiences in the listeners. We should not forget the authority of God’s Word in itself that does not depend on forms or on the surrounding culture. Summarizing this, we should count with the theology of preaching, that proved insufficient in narrative preaching. Why is the theology of preaching necessary beside or above its’ forms? Richard Lischer – working at the same time, but outside of the New Homiletic movement – says that there are several reasons for that. If the preacher misses the theology of preaching, then preaching will lack the substance, and coherence, relevance and finally authority. For the latter he said firstly: “The abuse of true authority always produces an abuse of true obedience.”²⁵ Then secondly he quoted Gerhard Ebeling: “Theology is necessary because man is by nature a fanatic.” We can assume that in the beginning theology came from preaching and today preaching is the final expression of theology. This theology aims not only at individuals but at the people of God in one community that is the body of Christ, therefore we need a theology of preaching to build and sustain communities of faith.

²⁵ Lischer, Richard: *Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*. Revised edition. Wipf & Stock Publisher, Eugene, OR 2001, 3.

Bibliography

- Allen, Ronald J.: *The Turn to the Listener: A Selective Review of a Recent Trend in Preaching*. In: *Encounter* 64. (2003/2), 167–196.
- Craddock, Fred B.: *As One Without Authority*. Chalice Press, Vendor 2001.
- Craddock, Fred B.: Inductive Preaching Renewed. In: Wesley, Allen O. Jr. (ed.): *Renewed Homiletic*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2010, 40–55.
- Craddock, Fred B.: *Overhearing the Gospel. Revised and Expanded Edition*. Chalice Press, Saint Louis, MO 2002, 70.
- Dawn, Ottoni-Wilhelm: New Hermeneutic, New Homiletic, and New Directions: An U.S. – North American Perspective. In: *Homiletic* 35. (2010/1), 17–31.
- Fisher, Walter R.: *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia S.C. 1987.
- Kuhn, Thomas S.: *The structure of scientific revolutions*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London 1970.
- Lischer, Richard: *Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*. Revised edition. Wipf & Stock Publisher, Eugene, OR 2001.
- Lose, David J.: Whither Hence, New Homiletic. Collected papers of annual meeting of Academy of Homiletics, November 30 – December 2000, (255–266) 255.
- Long, Thomas G.: And How Shall They Hear? The Listener in Contemporary Preaching. In: O'Day, Gail R. – Long, Thomas G. (eds.) *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*. Abingdon Press, Nashville 1993, 167–188.
- Reid, Robert Stephen: Postmodernism and the function of the New Homiletic in post-christendom congregations. In: *Homiletic* 20. (1995/2), 1–13.
- Thompson, James: *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2001.
- Vályi Nagy Ágnes: Narratív teológia, narratív ige hirdetés. In: *Théma* 1. (1999/2–3), 4–12.
- Wuthnow, Robert: *The Restructuring of American Religions: Society and Faith Since World War II*. Studies on in Church and State. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1988.

* * *

Fifty years ago a short book on homiletics was published, entitled *As One Without Authority*, by Fred B. Craddock, which proved to be a milestone in the history of homiletics. The interval of half a century since its publication allows to appreciate the homiletical concept that was built on the narrative paradigm. This evaluation emerges from the Hungarian context, where narrative preaching has always been a faraway guest for the last fifty years.

Keywords: New homiletics, narrative, inductive preaching, evocation, Fred B. Craddock.