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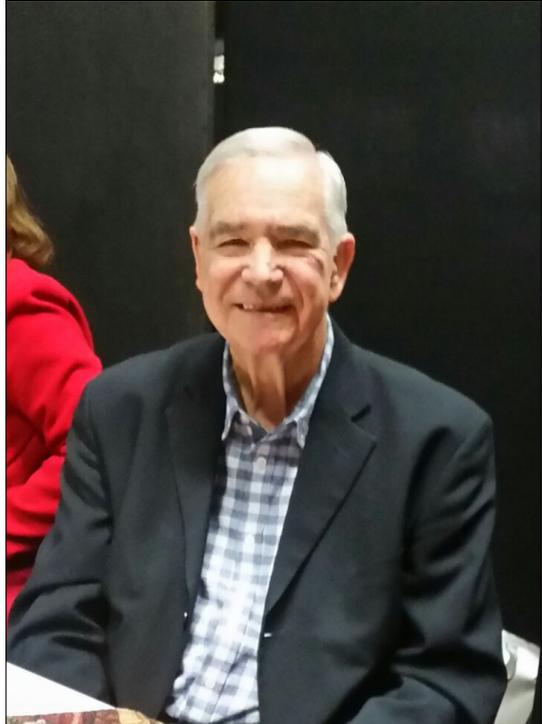
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Interview with Prof. Hennie Pieterse



THEOLOGICAL BIOGRAPHY

Hendrik (Hennie) Johannes Christoffel Pieterse was born on 11 June 1936 on a farm in the district of Brits, Transvaal, where he also went to school. He obtained the BA in 1957 and the BD in 1960 and, together with his BD study, he did a masters course in Afrikaans poetry at the University of Pretoria (UP). He served as pastor in four congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and was appointed as lecturer in Practical Theology at the UP (1976-1979), as senior lecturer in Practical Theology at Unisa (1980-1982), and as professor (1983-2001)



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in Practical Theology at Unisa. In 1992, he was offered a professorship at the Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands. He did not take this up, because he was committed to the change that was happening in South Africa. After his retirement from Unisa, he was appointed as extraordinary professor in Homiletics at UP (2002-2010). Hennie was a promoter (study leader) of 48 doctoral students. He also published 62 articles in accredited journals, as well as the following books:

1979. *Skrifverstaan en prediking*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel.
1986. *Verwoording en prediking*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel.
1987. *Communicative preaching*. Pretoria: Unisa Press. (2002. Translated in Korean. Suwon, Korea: Hapdong Theological Seminary Press.)
1988. *Die Woord in die werklikheid. 'n Teologie van die prediking*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel.
1991. *Gemeente en prediking*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel.
1993. *Praktiese teologie as kommunikatiewe handelingsteorie*. Pretoria: HSRC.
1995. *Desmond Tutu's message. A qualitative analysis* (Pieterse ed.). Kampen: Kok.
2001. *Preaching in a context of poverty*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.
2004. *Is there a God of human rights? The complex relationship between human rights and religion. A South African case* (with J.A. van der Ven and J.S. Dreyer). Leiden-Boston: Brill.

Since 2020, he is a research fellow in the Department Practical Theology and Missiology, Stellenbosch University.

ML: *Was this life the plan? How did it happen for you to pursue such a long and fruitful life in doing theology?*

HJCP: When I was 17 years old and at high school, I was trapped in the veld on my father's farm in a huge storm. I was lying under a thornbush while streams of water flowed over me. I was in prayer lying there and had a spiritual experience with God, which I have never forgotten. Not long after this, we attended the Pentecostal week of church services at our church in the countryside. During one of the sermons, I was called by God, in another spiritual experience, to become a minister in the DRC. There I experienced the power of a sermon when the Spirit works in interpreting a piece of relevant Scripture in the context of that morning's sermon. I fell in love with good sermons and started to regard it as the most important task of a pastor in a congregation.

During my years of study at UP, there was not enough funding for my study. I stayed in Sonop Hostel; I had to work every holiday during December and January on a research farm north of Pretoria to earn 60 pounds for the next year's study. The head of that research farm was Dr Calvin Strydom. From the first year that I worked there (I worked there for three years each long holiday), I received a blank envelope with cash in it every month. Years later, when I became the pastor of South-East Pretoria, I noted that Dr Calvin Strydom was an elder there. He delivered the speech of welcome in the congregation for me and my wife. He was already ill with cancer. Then it struck me – he dropped the money every month at Sonop hostel during my years of study. I did not speak about it with him or anybody else, because I regard it as coming from God. This experience motivated me to work harder and with more devotion, to go on studying and, when I was appointed at universities, I worked out a plan to write books on my subject. When one book was published, there was a new context with new challenges – so I researched that and wrote a book on it. My goal with writing was to inform students and pastors with good research work. In my last year at UP, Prof. H.D.A. du Toit told the twelve of us that he would leave the room and ask us to pray and ask the Lord for a gift from Him for our ministry. He read the wish of Solomon for wisdom from God. I prayed for good health. And He gave it to me in order to do my work. I am 86 years old and still healthy, in spite of having to use a walking stick since last year.

ML: *Are there any (other) particular influential markers (people, ideas, spaces, and times) that you want to highlight in this regard?*

HJCP: I passed my doctoral examination at Stellenbosch University *cum laude*. I was thinking of writing a thesis on pastoral care. Prof. Bethel Müller convinced me to write in homiletics on the new hermeneutic of Gerhard Ebeling. Church members and colleagues always said that I am a good preacher, and I regard the sermon as very important in the church. Therefore, I immediately said “Yes, I will do it”. Bethel was influential during the writing of my thesis, and I learned a lot from him. But in my reading on the theme of my thesis (hermeneutics) I was influenced in my thinking by K. Barth (1959; 1966). Prof. A.B. du Preez, who taught dogmatics in my BD years, let us read Barth at a time when Reformed professors did not like him. It was not prescribed in either Stellenbosch or the Netherlands, except in the Hervormde Kerk training in Amsterdam. Prof. Du Preez also let us read Calvin's *Institutes* and showed a link between the two authors. I was influenced by Barth's idea that Jesus Christ was the saviour of all people in the world – this opened my eyes for poor people, especially also Black people in our country. In my reading on hermeneutics, I was influenced by Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1972), which I had to wrestle through. I noticed the existentialism and the hermeneutical insights. But Gadamer's book *Warheit und Methode* (1960) was a real eye-opener for me on hermeneutics. I had to read it at that time in

German; the English translation was published later (2004, second edition). His idea of the horizons of understanding in the context of the text long ago and our current horizon of understanding was a real eye-opener. In order to understand the message of the biblical text, one has to understand the context and the thinking of the authors of the text and then interpret the message in our current horizon of understanding. Then there can be a fusion of the horizons in which the message of the text can become clear in our own context. Gerhard Ebeling (1962; 1967; 1969), on whose hermeneutics I wrote my thesis, said it well – you have to say it otherwise today in order to say the same as what the text said. Later, I discovered the work of Paul Ricoeur (1978; 1992) on hermeneutics, with which I am working at the moment in writing on hermeneutics in homiletics (see Pieterse & Wepener 2021). In this regard, namely metaphors, Prof. A.P. Grove, who taught me Afrikaans poetry, greatly influenced me. I discovered the power of metaphors in the language of our poets which opens up new images in one's mind. A good sermon cannot go without a good metaphor which opens the minds of the listeners. Therefore, Afrikaans poets play an immense role in my development: Eugene Marais, N.P. van Wyk Louw, D.J. Opperman, Breyten Bretenbach, Johann Lodewyk Marais, Bibi Slippers, Cas Vos and all of the younger poets. All their volumes of poetry are in my home library. I also write poems and publish them in *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*. The interaction of poetry and sermons is important. The poet and the preacher work with language and metaphors. Poetry teaches us how to use metaphors in our sermons.

When I worked on my thesis, there was no internet yet; therefore, I had to go to the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland for meetings with theologians and using the university libraries. In Prof. J. Firet, I discovered the basis which he laid down for empirical practical theology. This was taken up by his doctoral students Gerben Heitink (2021) and Johan A. Wolfaardt. Hans van der Ven (1993) developed it further so that it attracted wide attention. When I was appointed at Unisa, Johan Wolfaardt introduced me to it and I, therefore, started doing empirical research on sermons since my second book. When I worked on my book on Desmond Tutu's sermons, I was assisted by Fred Wester, a sociologist at Nijmegen in the Netherlands, who introduced me to the new method of content analysis of written texts, the grounded theory approach. That exercise was done with the beginning phase of grounded theory. Later, Kathy Charmaz (2006) wrote a book on this method which was suitable for content analyses of written sermon texts. Prof. F. Gerrit Immink invited me to sit in from time to time with him and his three doctoral students who worked with grounded theory analysis of sermon texts. I had a hand in the thesis as external examiner of Andre Verweij's thesis (2014). Immink and his doctoral students taught me a lot, so that I could do it as well in the analysis of sermons on poverty in South Africa (Pieterse 2013). Gerrit Immink also influenced my theological thinking.

ML: Can you please elaborate more on your specific interest in practical theology, and love for homiletics, in particular?

HJCP: As I explained before, many people had an influence on my approach to practical theology and homiletics. After my theological study at UP, I was called to Shabani in today's Zimbabwe during a time of great problems there. It was still a British colony and the freedom movements of the Black people who could not participate in the politics of the country disrupted much of daily life. The congregation was in a dire state. It had been without a pastor for more than three years. There I discovered that the congregation is the basic institution of the church, and that theological research should focus on the congregation in a practical way in order to help it function better. The only way we could study the practice in a congregation was by means of the discipline of practical theology. After my first sermon in Sabani, a mine worker and his wife came to the worship service. As I got out of my car, he approached me and said that he did not go to church anymore, but his wife was here last Sunday and she told him: "Hierdie dominee preek lekker" ("This minister knows how to preach"). He never missed a sermon after that. I realised that preaching that addresses the context and situation of the church members is a crucial aspect of our pastoral work. It was through my preaching that the members started coming back to the congregation, even those who went to the Apostolic Faith Mission. I realised that preaching is a central function of the pastor. And homiletics is part of the discipline of practical theology. Back in Pretoria, I was elected on the Marriage Counsel of Pretoria with Dr. Andries Gous as chairperson. Then, to my shock I realised how many people in our churches have these problems. So, for me, we have to serve the local congregation and the people there. Therefore, when Bethel Müller said "Write your thesis in homiletics", I immediately said "yes".

When I started at Unisa in 1980, I noticed that the department was propagating communicative actions as important for a pastor in a congregation. They asked me to read a piece by Rolf Zeffass on the theory of communicative actions. I, therefore, went to the beginning and started reading Habermas' book (1982). From there came the theme of my book on practical theology as a communicative action theory (Pieterse 1993). To communicate well in preaching and pastoral work, and to study the field of practical theology from the perspective of communicative actions is very important. My love for practical theology and homiletics, therefore, came from the experience in the actual situation of my practice in congregations.

ML: As someone who has lived through most of the history within these disciplinary bases, what would you highlight as some of the most significant shifts and developments that occurred during your lifetime within these fields?

HJCP: When I studied at UP and even when I became a lecturer there in 1976, the approach to practical theology was an official approach: the study of the officials in the congregation, namely the preacher, the elders and as a last thought sometimes the deacons. We had to study whether they worked according to the theories we *apply* from the other theological disciplines. The members of the congregation were not in focus – it was a one-way communication from the officials to the people. Furthermore, the theoretical basis of practical theology included the theories of systematic theology and biblical disciplines applied to practical theology. The name “official subjects” (*amptelike vakke*) changed to diaconia – the *service* of the officials to the congregation. Since 1960, there was a kind of cultural revolution in all fields of society and a feeling of liberation from the cemented ideas of the past that did not change (see Heitink 2021). In our discipline, a remarkable article by Bastian (1968) broke loose from the earlier theories applying from other disciplines. He argued that working just with the Word of God in a one-way traffic to the members has the problem of not knowing whether it reaches the worshippers. We have to research their reactions, *their* words, and their understanding and acceptance of what we preach: from the Word of God to the words of the church members and not to drop the Word of God, of course.

New research started. Interviews were held with the preacher on what he wants to say and, after the sermon, with some of the listeners. They discovered that the listeners can only remember a little of what the preachers said. They make little sermons for themselves in their situation when they hear a sentence or part of a sentence. Research on a broader scope started on the sermons and what the listeners hear and what their needs are (Daiber *et al.* 1980). It was not long after the change to practical theology as a discipline in its own right and with its own theories that our theories were formulated out of *empirical research* in our own fields of research (Mette 1976). Mette formulated the first theories for practice which we found in our own research work. At Unisa, we had enough research results to write a book on practical theology as a discipline with its own theories for practice (Heyns & Pieterse 1990). This was the first major change in our discipline. From then on empirical research became a major aspect of our discipline which we increasingly refined up to the current use of grounded theory analysis of the contents of written texts, in order to develop a theory from practice (see Van der Ven 1993; Verweij 2014).

A phase of *narrative preaching* came from the USA and disappeared again after a period. Gerben Heitink said to me in a personal conversation that this is riding on one rail of a railway line of two rails. There was a critical encounter with narrative preaching in the USA which Thomas Long relates in

his book (2009). His argument is that the religious situation in America has changed and that preaching should include teaching and ethical speech, which narrative preaching could not provide (see also Verweij 2014:243). In narrative preaching, the problem is that the critical aspect in preaching is neglected. In my view, stories as illustrations of the message of the text are good, but then they must be real life stories. If a preacher makes up a story, some members will think that he/she lies. Narrative and the critical aspect in preaching must balance each other.

A next major development was preaching against apartheid in the years of struggle against this dreadful policy. Desmond Tutu (see Pieterse [ed.] 1995) and Allan Boesak were at the forefront, but there were also many preachers in congregations who preached in this mode. Tutu's preaching has shown how powerful preaching is in the final collapse of apartheid.

After the new South Africa was installed with its good constitution and courts, we realised that poor people were getting poorer and job losses increased. A next new development was that some of us started research on preaching in a context of poverty (see Pieterse 2001). My six-year period of research of 26 sermons of DRC and URC preachers on the same biblical text all over the country with grounded theory analysis is an example of this development (see Pieterse 2013). Many young students in my classes picked up this mode of research. I think that some time we must start with critical analyses of the structures of government in the current South Africa, in order to break the structures that enhance poverty.

ML: *What about (disrupting) the “canon” of South African practical theology and homiletics? Which works would you want to highlight as classics and compulsory reading for current and future generations?*

HJCP: Must read in our context is the book by Johan Cilliers, *The living voice of the gospel* (2004) and, if I may say so, my book *Preaching in a context of poverty* (Pieterse 2001). I can name a few classics. The book by Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (1974). He emphasised the work of the Holy Spirit in the Bible, when we read it in waiting for a message and in the act of preaching. Thomas Long's book, *The witness of preaching* (1989; second edition 2005), is still very important today. He discusses the important process of what the preacher has heard in the text and the experience the preacher had with the text – this experience must be moved to the sermon in the expectation that the listeners may have the same experience with the text when it is preached. Dingemans' book, *Als hoorder onder de hoorders* (1991) is also important. The preacher must not preach from above, but on the same issues the members of the congregation have and speak about those questions from the Biblical text. Then there is a recent book on the history of preaching which I think is important for homiletics, O.C. Edwards' *A history of preaching* (2004).

A disruption of the “canon” of South African practical theology and homiletics is the discussion on post-colonialism in all academic spheres in our country. Current and future homileticians should work on this. Cas Wepener and I (2021) touched on this issue in our article on a preliminary theory of preaching.

ML: Perhaps another way to phrase much of the scope of the above is to probe for your particular working definition of preaching. What is a good sermon? What makes a sermon a sermon? Moreover, how did this basic working definition of yours develop and change over the years? Any subtle nuances and shifts to highlight in this regard?

HJCP: First of all, in my working understanding of preaching is good hermeneutics. We have to interpret an ancient text in its context and give words to the message it carries in our own contexts and to put the message in the language of our current context of that specific Sunday morning. I regard Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory as the best for homiletics at this stage. Preaching is preaching a text from the Bible for today’s listeners in their own context and language. To describe my view of preaching will take some time. I will do it as briefly as possible. The Bible should not be read in a fundamentalist way. It must be interpreted under the guidance of the Spirit in a praying manner and with common sense. There are good commentaries on all the books of the Bible that must also be engaged critically, and that can help readers understand the message they want to communicate to people in their contexts. The words in the Bible and the Holy Spirit are strongly connected. Words in the Bible are words of God in so far as the Spirit reveals them in our hearts and minds through his work. The Spirit speaks through Scripture. God is more than his revelation. God is still the incomprehensible God whom humans must approach in reverence.

The source for the message from God to the community of faith in the sermon to be preached next Sunday is from the texts of Scripture. Christians, members of the church who assemble on a Sunday morning, expect to hear a word from God for them through the sermon. The source of their faith came from the words of Scripture which have touched their lives, because the Bible is a book that breathes new life. The correspondence between faith and preaching is quite close. The authorising voice of Scripture heard in the community needs to be understood as a theological reality mediated through biblical literature. That is, the authorising voice heard in the text, is indeed the voice of God. That is, the voice communities of faith heard in the text, is a voice that authorises in odd and unsettling ways. The interpretation of the biblical text in its context and the community of faith’s context in next Sunday’s worship service is closely knit. The preacher cannot come to preach with an exegesis of the text alone. The context of the listeners on that Sunday must be

interwoven in the message of the text, and the exegesis worked into a speech that communicates well and is clear enough that the listeners can follow it with interest. One good metaphor to disclose the message is a good way to preach. I don't think it is good to throw a picture at the screen every time you start a new idea in the sermon. This will confuse the listeners, because you open their minds with one picture, and then there is another picture, and another picture – this is confusing. A sermon is not a discussion of the trends in investments. One good picture that captures the minds in opening the message of the text is enough.

The metaphor of a sponge may help illustrate the preacher's position in the process. The preacher is a sponge who must absorb in herself/himself the context of the congregation, simultaneously absorb the context and message of the text, and embody it in his/her existence. In this way, topical preaching is possible. My view of preaching has had minor changes through the years when I understood it more and better. Changes can only be influenced by changes in the contexts in which we live. Change happens all the time.

***ML:** Any particular wisdom and secrets for when it comes to teaching preaching? Again, drawing on your vast years of experience, what would you say are the key markers (and perhaps also temptations) in the pedagogy of homiletics? In short, what should the current and younger generations hear from their forefathers in this regard?*

HJCP: My experience through all the years is that students tend to preach in the same way their local preacher preached where they grew up and are called to study theology. It is a hard job to teach them to preach in another way than the old preachers preached where they came from. I usually prescribed a book which I discussed with them in the class. Then I gave them an assignment to prepare a sermon to choose from a number of Biblical texts relevant to the work they have read. In the next period, one of them had to preach his/her sermon to the class with a discussion afterwards. Then they handed in the sermons they wrote and I gave them a mark which I give back to them in the next period. In this next period, we discuss a further chapter in the prescribed book and repeat the procedure. I was doing this right from the first year and right through to the last year of their course in homiletics. There were only a few who sometimes did not come to class. They quickly realised that they must attend the classes.

I think it is important that homiletics students should get homiletic books to read and study in whatever way they get hold of them. Each student should have that literature. Furthermore, they must learn to preach in the classes from the first year already. Discussions between them under the lecturer's leadership are important, in order to shape their understanding of how to preach in a current context.

ML: *Thus far we have only focused on homiletics and practical theology, but what about liturgics? Can one really do homiletics and practical theology without liturgics? How should we read and deal with this aspect of our history?*

HJCP: To my mind, it is not a good development that one practical theologian specialises in homiletics and another person specialises in liturgics. If it is too much work for one lecturer to teach both, the two of them should work closely with each other and together as Cas Wepener (who specialised in ritual studies) and I did at UP. Where possible, one lecturer should teach both, because liturgy is the bosom in which the sermon nestles and is delivered.

When I was young, the synod of the DRC decided on one liturgy form and how the different parts of the liturgy should follow each other. It was cast in concrete. I discussed this with Bethel Müller and we decided that we should try to shift the parts in the liturgy, for example the confession of faith at the end of the liturgy after the sermon. We wanted an alternative. Then came the swing away from the impersonal way of doing liturgy and preaching to the personal way.

This development came from the focus on the (new) apostolic ways of doing liturgy in the USA in the wake of the re-invention of charismatics. In the DRC, some congregations removed the pulpit and the organ. The official hymn book was cast away and new songs, sometimes with two or four lines, were sung over and over again accompanied by the music of a band with different musical instruments, notably drums. There were many disputes among church people. Thomas Long called it “the worship wars”. He wrote an excellent book on this issue (Long 2001). In the teaching of liturgics at our faculties, the students coming from such very relaxed and easy personal kind of congregations, changed their minds and some went back to a more Reformed but renewed kind of worship service. In the Gereformeerde Kerk and the Hervormde Kerk, this did not happen. In the city where I live, people are going over borders of their own congregations to other congregations where a liturgy is practised which they like. There is therefore a variety of liturgies in our churches.

ML: *How deeply would you say have you felt the pandemic’s impact upon your being as a theologian? How has the pandemic changed your theological mind and the manner in which you theologise in any specific way?*

HJCP: The only impact the pandemic had on me is the fact that we could not go to our church physically on a Sunday morning for worship service. We missed the corporate worship together with other people. My wife and I read the Bible on a Sunday morning, discussed the message of that specific Scripture and prayed together. But, I am concerned that the You Tube way of reaching church members at home on a Sunday morning, good as it is

today, will create a problem in the future when the pandemic is over. Marileen Steyn, Cas Wepener and I (2020) researched the You Tube sermons in the Western Cape on this issue to see if these sermons have another character. Ferdi Kruger of North-West University (Potchefstroom) did empirical research among church members of the Gereformeerde Kerk and found that nearly half of the respondents said that the You Tube way is good for them and that they will not go back physically to the church building in the future. I foresee problems in the future and we should start writing theologically on the importance of the bodily presence of church members at a Sunday morning's worship service.

***ML:** Lastly, please tell us more about your current and future research plans. What kind of projects are you currently busy with, and any particular publications we can expect from you in the next few years to come?*

HJCP: I am working with Cas Wepener on a current theory of preaching. In this regard, I have published an article on the history of empirical homiletics in South Africa (Pieterse 2020). Furthermore, in this project we have published a preliminary theory of preaching (Pieterse & Wepener 2021). Cas has done the liturgical part and read my part – the homiletical part of the theory – critically. We are embarking on empirical (grounded theory) content analyses of sermons from the perspective of the homiletical theory we have put on the table. The aim of this article with the preliminary homiletical theory is to explore preaching as a practice by making use of both older and newer sources whilst taking cognisance of continuous contextual changes and developments within the discipline of homiletics. More precisely, the aim is to formulate a preliminary theory of preaching that can be revisited and revised as part of a larger empirical homiletical investigation which makes use of grounded theory. We depart from this current theory of preaching to empirically research the practice of preaching. When the empirical part of the research project has been completed, this theory will be revisited to formulate a new homiletic praxis theory. This is the common process of practical theological research (see Verweij 2014).

Thank you for inviting me to answer your questions. I have enjoyed writing up my whole life's history in our field of study.

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