


Naming God's presence in preaching

**Author:**Gerrit Immink^{1,2} **Affiliations:**¹Practical Theology, Protestant Theological University, Groningen, the Netherlands²Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa**Corresponding author:**

Gerrit Immink, fgimmink@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 08 Mar. 2019

Accepted: 02 July 2019

Published: 29 Nov. 2019

How to cite this article:Immink, G., 2019, 'Naming God's presence in preaching', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(4), a5453. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5453>**Copyright:**

© 2019. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Does preaching bring God on stage? Protestants assume an intimate relationship between the 'Word of God' and preaching. However, the principle that 'preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God' caused intense debates about the status of God language. The author highlights the classic disputes of the 19th and 20th centuries and argues that the old dilemma must be overcome. Sermons address the subjective-contextual conditions of the listeners, and this in no way precludes the attention for divine disclosure. On the contrary, there is a true reciprocity between personal spirituality and the sense of God as really other. The author defends the thesis that the renewed attention for the human condition in the theological debates of the last decades should also include a positive stand towards the believer's spiritual awareness of God's real existence and presence.

Keywords: preaching; pulpit eloquence; god-talk; sermonic discourse; religious experience; indwelling spirit; homiletics.

Introduction

Preaching is a communicative practice. Some preachers, including Maake Masango, are excellent performers of the Word of God. They know how to present the world of the Bible in the present-day situation as a living Word that touches the congregation. Their sermonic discourse is living speech and not dead language. The preachers of mixed race and black South African communities mostly have a well-developed competence to integrate Scripture in their lively oral performance. During the apartheid era, preachers like Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak prophetically visualised the obscurity of evil and evoked redemptive patterns of life. The sermons of Masango that I have heard were not only prophetic but also *experiential*. The mix of life experiences and personal piety is also a strong legacy of African faith communities, and precisely, this factor might be of crucial importance to build up the Church in the near future.

The *Performative Presence* in the preaching act, however, is a mysterious and rather complex phenomenon.

A crucial element is the eloquence of the preacher. But this is certainly not the only or the decisive factor.

The preaching practice is rooted in a *reciprocity* between the gathered community and the preacher. There would be no preaching without a gathered community and without the interaction between the community and the preacher. Furthermore, the community and the preacher are aware of the religious dimension of the preaching event: the disclosure of the *living Christ*.

This disclosure is never guaranteed, although in a subtle way it is connected with the attention of the audience, the appeal of the Scriptures and the authenticity of the preacher. Meanwhile, the Church confesses that the ministry of the Word of God as a revealing and inspiring Word is ultimately performed by the Spirit of God. This illumination, however, is performed in and through the communicative act of preaching as a human endeavour.

Speech and involvement

As human beings we can express and communicate our faith. Martin Luther (1982) once said:

[S]umma summarum: I want to preach it, say it, write it. But I do not want to force anyone or violently insist. For faith wants to be accepted voluntarily and freely. Take an example to me. I have resisted the indulgences and the papists, but not with violence. I just tapped into the Word, I preached and wrote, and further I did nothing. [...] I have let the Word act. (p. 280)

Especially in Protestantism, there is a deep conviction that the Christian faith requires a free assent of the human mind and soul. Personal commitment can never be enforced. In matters of faith,

Note: HTS 75th Anniversary Maake Masango Dedication.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

external authority only works properly in correspondence with inner assent. Therefore, every preacher must realise that a theatrical performance on the pulpit is very dangerous and that any appeal to the listener must in all circumstances respect the freedom and autonomy of the hearer. Besides, the communication of faith is not simply a matter of speech and communication. It awaits a presence and working of God.

This is a delicate issue. The sermon is an oral event. The preacher tells stories, exposes Scripture, shares experiences and clarifies the faith. The sermon intends to move the mind; to generate thoughts and feelings; to appeal, motivate, inspire, etc. And now the question arises: is this simply an operation on the part of the human subject (initiated by the preacher), or does the performance of preaching also imply a *presence and operation of God*? Does the sermon bring God *on stage*? Of course, the sermon may contain God-talk, and the hearers may experience 'something' of God. Certainly, the interaction of the gathered community with the preacher brings forth a religious dynamic that may create an awareness of God. But is God truly *actively* involved? Are God's presence and his operations part of the practice of preaching?

The apostle Paul argues that the Gospel is 'the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes' (Rm 1:16). Following this line of thought, Protestants describe preaching as the ministry of the *Word of God*. In Reformed circles, the formulation of Bullinger in the *Confessio Helvetica posterior* became leading: *Predicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei* [The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God] (Bullingero 1566:10). Although this sentence does not imply an identification of the sermon with the Bible or with the Word of God, it shows an intimate relationship. It suggests that the sermon as part of the liturgy is not just a human enterprise. God is somehow actively involved in the act of preaching. One of the problems with this principle has been that the divine involvement was too easily connected with the performance of the preacher, and consequently, people ascribed a risky and quite improper authority to the preacher. But this is a misleading and false interpretation of the Protestant principle. The expression *the Word of God* must primarily be understood in relation to *the human act of faith*. When Paul speaks of the Word of God, he relates that to the activity of keeping the faith:

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, *which is indeed at work in you who believe*. (1 Th 2:13)

The divine operations are at work in the reception of the Gospel. The good news is accepted as a word of God because it generates faith. The sermon *becomes* a word of God, so Calvin says, when the Spirit of God is at work:

Outward preaching is vain and useless unless the Spirit himself acts as the teacher. God therefore teaches in two ways. He makes us hear his voice through the words of men, and inwardly he constrains us by his Spirit. These two occur together or separately, as God sees fit. (quoted by Edwards 2004:314)

This implies that the entire act of preaching – the proclaiming as well as the appropriation – is an activity in which God is involved as an actor. This does not downscale the use of eloquence and rhetoric in preaching.

It requires, however, a theoretical agenda that does justice to both the *human* and the *divine* dimension of preaching, without reducing the one to the other.

Divine discourse in preaching

In past centuries, there have been passionate debates about the question whether preaching should be understood as a *Word of God*. That the sermon takes the form of oral speech is never rejected, but the central question subsequently is: how is this human speech becoming an *effective* Word of God? Is the sermon just an interhuman discourse, or does it in the setting of worship become a *divine discourse*? And if so, how are these human and divine discourses inter-related? Some argue that the sermon is just interhuman discourse with a *high religious content*: the stories, exposure of Scripture and the symbols of faith arouse a *sense of God* among the community. In this way, the religious dimension remains in the phenomenal world of human discourse and religious experience. Others argue that this is too weak: preaching is the *proclamation* of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The human speech, as far as it is faithful to the Scriptures, is a *naming of God*, and through this proclamation, God is actively present 'in spirit and truth' (Jn 4:24).

Here the claim is that God-talk in the sermon really *names* God, in the sense of: *refers to* (or: designates) the reality of the living God, and that the living God (the risen Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit) will become actively present and effective through the sermon. The preaching of the gospel is 'the power of God' (Rm 1:16). Faith comes from hearing the message, 'and the message is heard through the word of Christ' (Rm 10:17).

I hold that these two views do not contradict one another (Immink 2018:92–112). Nevertheless, the practice and the theology of preaching show a continuous struggle about the interpretation of the dimension of the *divine discourse*. In the first half of the 20th century, the term 'kerygmatic theology' came in vogue and both Barth and Bultmann criticised the old, human-subject-centred model of religious experience. It is needless to say that their political and social context urged them in this direction. But we must also admit that after the Second World War, the situation changed gradually. The overwhelming impact of the modern secularisation process and the rise of the free and autonomous citizen in the second half of the 20th century brought the old liberal themes back in the centre of theology and practice of preaching. The *authority* of the 'Word of God' became problematic once again, and communicative strategies were desperately needed.

Classic disputes

Under the influence of the Enlightenment, the theological attention shifted from God to man. Gradually, the idea took

hold that human knowledge of God is rather problematic. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant had determined the limits of human knowledge and criticised classical theism. As God himself is beyond the sphere of knowledge, modern theologians moved their attention to the world of religious experience, ethics and personal piety. Religion was primarily seen as a phenomenon in the human realm. Although Protestant worship remained Word-oriented, the Scriptures were understood from 'below', as a collection of documents that express religious life (Niebergall 1971:9–74). In this way, critical exegesis found a way to deal with the so-called legendary and mythical traits of the Bible. In Homiletics, there was a growing interest in 'religion as it is lived' and in the 'religious personality' of the preacher and the hearer. The theological emphasis came to lie on the *non-cognitive* status of the Christian faith, and at the same time, a *non-referential* symbolic talk about God became common.

This approach to religion during the 18th and 19th centuries offered a fertile ground for the influence of rhetoric in preaching. The new eloquence focused on the speaker, the public and linguistic skills. Moreover, there was, more than before, an interest in the psychological dimension of communication, as well as in the literary form and style of the presentation. A good example of the new use of eloquence in preaching is found in the *Homilétique, ou théorie de la prédication* of the influential Swiss theologian Alexander Vinet. This book was immediately translated into Dutch, German and English (Vinet 1853).

According to Vinet, Christianity is a religion of mind and thought, and must be *spoken*. However, this speech is not merely a matter of words, but rather consists in the sharing of *life*. The truth of the Gospel must become alive and must become a reality in *living persons*. Eloquence presupposes an intense study of the human heart and consists in a mutual correspondence between the spirit and the heart of the audience and the thoughts and the expressions used by the preacher (Vinet 1853):

Eloquence rests on sympathy. One is never eloquent, except on condition of speaking or writing under the dictation of those he is addressing; it is our hearers who inspire us, and if this condition is not fulfilled, we may be profound and agreeable, but we shall not be eloquent. (p. 5)

Leading homileticians in the 19th and early 20th centuries were focused on the heartbeat of spiritual life. The subjectivity of faith – as an expression of inner life – and the personality of the preacher were considered to be key values in the communication of the Gospel. Sermons dealt with biblical characters in detail, and ministers painted the spiritual and daily concerns of the listeners in full colour. Of course, there was God-talk in these sermons, but primarily 'from below', wrapped up in the descriptions of the *mental state* of the human soul. The needs and the desires of the human condition played the first fiddle, and the biblical stories were seen as a mirror that lightens up the ethical and spiritual concerns of the people.

The destructive violence and immense suffering of the First World War and the rise of national socialism in Germany after the war brought to light the bankruptcy of liberal theology. A new generation of theologians and ministers realised that the established church as well as academic theology had failed. They understood that there had been a lack of *prophetic criticism*. They felt that the *Word of God* had been silenced and that the so-called *religious personalities* had contributed to an immense catastrophe.

In a lecture in 1921, Eduard Thurneysen spoke in fiery language against this so-called eloquence, against these so-called needs of the people and against the role of the minister. According to Thurneysen, the relationship between God and us is much less smooth than we are told and cannot be simply characterised in terms of religious interest (Thurneysen 1971):

Therefore, do not concern yourself any longer with the *psychology* of the hearers and the so-called understanding of the *human psyche*. There should be no speaking from the pulpit about life experiences, nor about the pious lives of people (neither of others nor of ourselves), in an attempt to awaken similar experiences in others. It should be all about the *knowledge of God, the proclamation of God!* (p. 113)

Following Karl Barth, Thurneysen understood that the Gospel – the *kerygma* – is not always reassuring and comforting us, but is sometimes critical and denouncing human self-interest. A true Word of God comes *from above* (*senkrecht von oben*), criticises our self-made ideals and desires. The message witnesses a radical new existence, namely the breaking news of the kingdom of God. The 'Word of God' refers to an *event*; it proclaims the very presence of God in Christ. It is important to realise that these critical theologians were themselves eloquent preachers and had a deep and fair intuition of human needs and sorrow. They believed, however, that the true understanding of our human condition and the triumph of the new life is only granted to us when we hear the *Word of God*. Human existence is, in their view, a radically *eccentric* existence. We do not owe life and do not possess faith. It is rather *given* to us by God. Thurneysen and Barth fear that the increasing interest of preachers in the techniques of speech and communication betrays their lack of trust in the absolute priority and dependability of the Word of God. Eloquent speech and empathy with the needs of the people is not sufficient for the *event* of God's graceful presence. The full event of the Word is *God's business*. Ultimately, Lischer (2005:23) argues that the proclamation of the Word of God cannot be professionalised.

The dilemma in sermonic God-talk

In 1922, Barth formulated the dilemma of preaching as follows:

As theologians we have to speak of God. We are human beings, however, and as such we cannot speak of God. We must acknowledge both, *the requirement and the impossibility*, and meanwhile give honor to God. This is our real problem, and the other questions are peanuts compared with this one. (Barth 1990:432)

It is important to realise that this paradox was not meant as an easy escape from the challenges of modernism. According to Barth, God is speaking and acting in his self-revelation, in the kerygmatic act – ‘*im Vollzug*’, that means, in the *phenomenal world*, in the history of Jesus Christ and in the performance of preaching. Moreover, the Word of God is an address, it is *ad hominem*. For Barth, it is crucial, however, that we acknowledge the *external component* of this address: it is *God’s word*. God is speaking, acting, promising, etc. (Barth 1958:1–34). God is seen as an *active subject* and has, moreover, a certain *objectivity* (God is *gegenständlich* present). In a speech in 1924, he says (Barth 1989):

Preaching is in any case, however much one stresses that it is the expression of religious experience, the wager to speak of *God* as an *objective reality*. If the church does not want to do this, she can better be silent. (p. 96)

It is interesting and noteworthy that Bultmann has a slightly different and more existentialistic (and consequently modernistic) approach to God-talk. He also emphasised the actual presence of God in the preaching act, but in his argumentation Bultmann remains within the limits of human experience: the Word of God places the hearers in a moment of decision-making (*Entscheidung*). The Word of God is a wake-up call, a hearing of God’s presence here and now, a critical word. But Bultmann refuses to speak of this word as an *object* of thought or perception. God is only real *in* the act of the address, in the moment of interhuman discourse. ‘If we want to speak of God, we actually have to *speak of ourselves*’ (Bultmann 1933:30). We cannot objectify God; we can only speak of our being addressed.

Although the theological debates about divine revelation and human experience have been modified in the course of time, the classic debates still influence many contemporary discussions in church and theology. That is no wonder because theologians and church leaders cannot ignore the continuous challenges of the modern and postmodern cultural heritage. In the churches, we observe that on the one hand, moderate forms of kerygmatic theology maintained a certain stronghold, and on the other hand, the subjectivism of protestant liberalism, as well as protestant pietism, revived and has dominion in large parts of the churches.

Yet, all these currents face a rapidly changing society, and Christian communities are puzzled how to communicate the Gospel. There is hardly a natural basis for God-talk in our secular age anymore, neither in society nor in the churches. It turns out that new generations are becoming increasingly illiterate in religious matters. And the Bible has no natural authority anymore, neither in society nor among Christians.

In fact, there is a widespread cynicism towards the biblical text where one would expect reverence.

Authority and tradition have lost their usual validity because they seem to contradict the modern mindset of pure reason and the postmodern attitude of relativity and personal choice. The digital generation is accustomed to a virtual

realm and a global network society. Diversity has become a key concept in the opinions of our contemporary society, and a way to cope with increasing diversity is subjectivism and individualism.

The puzzle of the relationship between *God speaking* and *human experience* will remain a never-ending challenge for Christian preaching. In times of crisis, churches have heard the voice of the liberating and healing Word of God, and they have experienced the power of the Word. And even today, in spite of the secularised mindset of modernism and postmodernism, Christian communities experience the illuminating and empowering presence of God. The Word of God *becomes alive* in the gathering of the people of God, in the performance of the liturgy, in the hearing of the sermon, in the prayers and in the sacraments. In order to grasp this active presence, it is important to keep in mind that the ‘Word of God’ has two focal points: *speaking* and *hearing*. As St. Paul said: ‘the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe’ (1 Th 2:13). The Word is a powerful presence *of God* in the human realm.

Reciprocity between divine appearance and human perception

Both Protestant liberalism and pietism have emphasised the presence and work of God in the human soul and mind. Liberalism followed the framework of the Enlightenment and focused on the realm of religious experience (in line with Schleiermacher) and renounced truth claims about God as a metaphysical reality.

Pietism focused on piety and conversion, and although preachers formally maintained the confession of Protestant orthodoxy, their sermons focused on the *appropriation* of salvation in the heart and lives of the people. It is noteworthy that both liberalism and pietism spoke frequently of the *regeneration of the heart* as a moral category, as somehow observable in human life (Immink 2018:49–78). Unlike these similarities in structure, there are deep controversies in theological content. The debates about the resurrection of Jesus Christ illustrate different lines of thought. Roughly speaking, one can say that liberal theologians (from Strauss to Lüdemann) interpret the resurrection within the framework of a naturalistic worldview and understand it as a *subjective vision* of the disciples (Theissen & Merz 1998:504). The consequence is that the resurrection is mainly understood in terms of a spiritual change in the believer, comparable with the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. Didn’t Paul reflect on that moment by saying that ‘God was pleased to reveal his Son *in me* so that I might preach him among the Gentiles’ (Gl 1:16)? Although modern theologians do not follow Lüdemann (1994) uncritically in his psychological interpretation, many sermons on the resurrection of Christ and other miracle stories are wrapped up in narrative symbolism and poetical imagining. They focus on *human perceiving* rather than on *God acting*.

I will argue that a preacher can do full justice to the subjective-contextual condition of the hearer without handing in on true

God-talk. Preaching is an address to the congregation, and it evokes the attention of the hearer. The attentiveness of the hearer is a prerequisite for the religious involvement and activity of the hearer. Attentive involvement varies not only in degree but also in modes of attention (Pleizier 2010:219–225). We can distinguish, for example, between life-world attentiveness, textual attentiveness and kerygmatic attentiveness. When a sermon speaks about the resurrection of Christ, there will be references to the Scripture story, to the desires and the needs of the listeners, but the hearer's mind will also be directed to the *Christ-event*. Christ will be presented to the hearer as 'someone' or 'something' to relate to. The sermonic address may stimulate the religious thoughts and feelings of the hearer and evoke an awareness of the workings of Christ, for example, of his mercy, love and grace. The hearer may acquire Christ *in mind* in the listening process. In terms of religious experience, there may be a *direct awareness* or an *immediate perception* of Christ's benevolence on the part of the human subject. This awareness on the part of the human subject correlates, according to Alston, to a *presentation* or *appearance* on the part of God (Alston 1991:37). I hold this view that this reciprocity between appearance and perception is crucial for the understanding of religious experience. In belief-forming practices, such as worship and preaching, belief in God is the result of an accumulated experience of God's active presence. It is a mode of cognition that is aroused by the use of religious language (stories, proclamations, descriptions, the name of God, etc.) but results in an awareness of God as an *active Giver*. Christian believers hold that Jesus Christ has disclosed God's self-giving love. Becoming aware of God's presence in Christ implies for them that *God is acting in Christ*.

The full awareness of God's presence involves both a *divine self-presentation* and *human receptivity* (Dalferth 2006:220). God's revelation is a reflexive insight in which we become aware of ourselves in the light of God's presence. It is furthermore characteristic for religious awareness that there is not only reciprocity but also *asymmetry* in the human-divine relationship. God is the Holy One, he is the Wholly Other. God is believed to be a free and sovereign agent. Both Old Testament and New Testament emphasise God's self-presentation in his revealing and liberating acts. 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' (Ex 20:2). And according to St. Paul, God is similarly an active agent in the resurrection of Jesus. For we 'believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead' (Rm 4:24). The resurrection of Jesus is an act of God. That God alone 'raised Jesus from the dead' (Rm 10:9) does, however, in no way detract the effect of this salvific act in the hearts and lives of the congregation. St. Peter argued that God 'In his great mercy [he] has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...' (1 Pt 1:3). Our living in hope, so St. Peter argues, is caused by the resurrection of Jesus by God. Hence, there is an intimate relationship between God's resurrection of Jesus and our spiritual state of mind. But God's act in the history of salvation takes priority over the effects in the

here-and-now. There is, so to say, a *theological order* in the acts of God: the Holy Spirit in his indwelling presence and renewing activity is preceded by the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The works of the Spirit are dependent upon the work of Christ. Like Jesus said to the disciples: 'Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you' (Jn 16:7). The Spirit of God will present and activate the work of Jesus: 'That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you' (Jn 16:15).

Fragments of divine disclosure in sermonic discourse

Hearers expect that the preacher addresses them in such a way that the sermon connects to their own lives.

Personal engagement is often stimulated when listeners recognise bits and pieces of their own life and daily concerns. The process of recognition contains feelings like, 'Yes, this concerns me and my life'. When listeners cannot identify, they may slowly 'move out'. Worship also has elements of *religious recognition*: 'This is what we believe', 'these are my worries and my delights in faith'. Recognition, however, is not primarily an individual matter. The congregation is a community, and communal affiliation is an important dimension of preaching. The sense of belonging transcends the personal and the individual (Pleizier 2010:179). Recognition and the possibility of identification do not mean that sermons have to be anecdotal.

Stories and illustrations are sometimes useful; however, in order to work at a deeper level of bonding, they must have the breadth and depth of thought. Anecdotal sermons sometimes go from one human interest item to another and only cause confusion. Too much decoration distracts. Nevertheless, in order to connect with the listeners, a sermon must be loaded with the realities of the human heart.

Sermonic discourse appeals to the human heart, and utterances about God stand in close relation to the feelings and the intentions of the human mind and soul. In the gatherings of communities of faith, the name of God and the experiences of the human heart come to life together. The sermon in particular is a meeting place of diverse voices. Although the language of love and justice is filling the air, sometimes harsh words are spoken. Cries of injustice and human complaints are heard. But divine voices of love and anger are also heard, and voices of reconciliation and hope. The voice of God does not sound in the vacuum. It is an address; it sounds in real life and is accepted or rejected *as it is perceived in a state of mind*. What I mean is that our human awareness of God and our being addressed by God is wrapped up in psychological, affective, cognitive and spiritual mechanisms and processes. Faith includes a subjective dimension in terms of attitudes, feelings, states of mind, intentions, volitions, etc. This dimension is fully alive in sermonic discourse and plays a substantial role in cultivating our relationship with God. Especially, in a

worship setting, God-talk comprises praise to God and this arouses attitudes of gratitude, humility, remorse and joy.

The attention for the crucial role of human subjectivity does not negate, however, the authentic and sovereign presence of the living God as an active agent. Although subjectivity (the life of the 'human self') plays an important role in our relationship with God, in the act of faith we nevertheless relate to God as *a reality outside our own 'selves'*. This is what Barth called God's *Gegenständlichkeit*. There is, so to say, an object-side of faith. The community of faith senses God as a co-subject – as someone who addresses us, someone who acts upon us and someone who bestows his love upon us. This is a sense of the other *as really other*. In faith we ascribe freedom, independence and *aseitas* to God. In his otherness God is perceived as another intentional being, who encounters us in a personal address. It is noteworthy that religious people in their encounter with God experience moments of reverse: they discern the alterity of God as the Other.

Despite the reciprocity in the relationship, they acknowledge asymmetry. God is the Holy Other and this implies a deep feeling of heteronomy. Acts of faith often imply a de-centring of the human self (Westphal 2005:22).

In addition to this self-subsistence of God, the object-side of faith implies a second feature. Sermonic discourse implicitly or explicitly *predicates* specific traits of God. In the community of faith, God is not a mystic blanc; on the contrary, he is distinguishable as such-and-such. God has a specific character and his attributes are praiseworthy. Consequently, faith and trust in God involve a cognitive dimension. Faith implies bits and pieces of confession. Christians believe *that God is benevolent, that he is righteous*, etc. These 'that' sentences (sometimes referred to as 'is' statements) also refer to an object-side of faith; they denote the propositional content, the confessional truth.

So, looking at the object-side of faith, we face two different aspects: (1) the encounter with God as the Other, as existentially over and 'against' me, and (2) the object of faith, that is, the confessional content of faith. This second aspect is very important for a living relationship with God because it identifies the personal character of God. According to Ricoeur, character is a set of distinctive marks which permit the re-identification of an individual as the same (Ricoeur 1994:119). Permanence in time can, according to him, be summed up in two expressions: *character* and *keeping one's word*. A great deal of sermonic discourse is concerned with the narrative identity of the God in whom we trust. And it is interesting to note that, especially in the Old Testament, the relationship between God and his people is expressed in the notion of the covenant. The covenant cannot be thought of without the *promise*. Indeed, the Word of God is a promise, and God is the one *who keeps his word* (Immink 2005:240–246). In the life of faith, the trustworthiness of the speaker (God) is decisive. Christian

faith has a *theocentric* structure because faith finds its stronghold ultimately in the divine promises, for example, in the character of the divine.

Reformed balance

When Christian communities assemble to celebrate their faith and to hear the Word of God, they truly expect to experience *a touch of the sacred* (Immink 2014). It is, however, beyond dispute that eloquence in performance and sympathy with the hearers are usually necessary conditions for divine disclosure in preaching. There is an intimate relationship and even reciprocity between divine disclosure and human performance. From the perspective of the listeners, active participation and spiritual engagement are important factors in the discovery of God's presence. The preacher must therefore seek to stimulate the attention of the hearers. But it is also clear that the preacher cannot manipulate the actual presence of God.

That remains a free gift from God. Preachers can, however, complicate and frustrate the encounter with God.

In a Christian congregation, communicative and theological skills play a crucial role in creating the right conditions for hearing 'the voice of God'. While an act of faith comprises the involvement of the whole human self, the sermon has to touch the *subjective-contextual* condition of the hearer. Part of that condition is personal spirituality.

The Reformed tradition has used the Pauline vocabulary about the interaction between the Holy Spirit and 'the inner man' as a suitable model to clarify the contact zone between God and the human being. St. Paul says that God may strengthen you 'with power through his Spirit in your inner being' (Eph 3:16). By God's grace, the Spirit of Christ dwells in the faithful and this indwelling Spirit regenerates the human self. In this line of thought, Calvin emphasised the importance of the adoption or appropriation of Christ in the life of the believer. 'To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and dwell in us' (Calvin 2002:463). This indwelling of the Spirit of Christ, this 'touch of the divine', remains a mystery of faith. Yet exactly this contact zone is a crucial factor in sermonic discourse. Listeners expect to be moved in their commitment, in their worries and desires. It is obvious that the human heart has somehow to be moved during active participation in sermonic discourse. This involves not only the emotional life but also the broad scale of our mental and psychic life, and the whole range of spirituality and faith.

The 'Word of God' has an address. It enters the human heart and mind; it is heard, accepted and rejected, 'pondered in the heart', contemplated and put into practice. Sermons express these operations and processes within the human realm. This focus on the human part does in no way contradict the part of the sovereign and divine revelation. There is no

contradiction in a *true theological* approach ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ because the Christian faith comprises both elements. Based on biblical texts, preachers dare to speak of God and the gathered community expects them to do so. And this God-talk evokes the presence and deeds of God. The addressees imagine and contemplate the character and works of God. It is important to realise that in biblical stories incidents of divine salvation are pictured as *acts of God*. They are not only mysterious events but also divine acts. This means that these occurrences bear the distinctive quality and trademark of God. This also holds for the Gospel stories. They tell us that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus disclose God’s character. In Jesus, we encounter a visible act of God. The resurrection of Jesus is a divine act. Dunn rightly argues that Easter is ultimately about what happened *to Jesus* (Dunn 2003:876). In the resurrection story, the angel said about Jesus, who was crucified: ‘He is not here, he was risen’ (Mt 28:6). But it is also evident that this act of God has an enormous impact on the lives of the community of followers. They were touched by Jesus – by the historical Jesus as well as by the risen Christ. Then the faith in Jesus Christ is ultimately also seen as an act of God:

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. (Rm 8:11)

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Author(s) contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Alston, W.P., 1991, *Perceiving God. The epistemology of religious experience*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Barth, K., 1958, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik. Die Lehre von Gott*, Evangelischer Verlag Zollikon, Zürich.
- Barth, K., 1989, ‘Menschenwort und Gottes Wort in der christlichen Predigt’, in F. Wintzer (Hg.), *Predigt. Texte zum Verständnis und zur Praxis der Predigt in der Neuzeit*, p. 96, Kaiser, München.
- Barth, K., 1990, ‘Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie’, in *Gesamtausgabe. Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925*, p. 432, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, Zürich.
- Bullinger, H. [1566] 1866, *Confessio Helvetica Posterior*, E. Böhl edn., W. Braumüller, Vienna.
- Bultmann, R., 1933, *Glauben und Verstehen. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Mohr & Siebeck, Tübingen.
- Calvin, J., 2002, *Institutes of the Christian religion*, transl. H. Beveridge, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI, viewed 28 February 2019, from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html>.
- Dalferth, I.U., 2006, *Becoming present. An inquiry into the Christian sense of the presence of God*, Peeters, Leuven.
- Dunn, J.D.G., 2003, *Jesus remembered*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Edwards, O.C. Jr., 2004, *A history of preaching*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.
- Immink, F.G., 2005, *Faith. A practical theological reconstruction*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Immink, F.G., 2014, *The touch of the sacred. The practice, theology and tradition of Christian worship*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Immink, G., 2018, *Over God gesproken. Preken in theorie en praktijk*, Boekencentrum, Utrecht.
- Lischer, R., 2005, *The end of words. The language of reconciliation in a culture of violence*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Lüdemann, G., 1994, *Die Auferstehung Jesu. Historie, Erfahrung, Theologie*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Tübingen.
- Luther, M., 1982, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Karin Bornkamm und Gerhard Ebeling (Hgs.), Band I, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.
- Niebergall, F., 1971, ‘Die moderne Predigt’, in G. Hummel (ed.), *Die Aufgabe der Predigt*, pp. 9–74, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt.
- Pleizier, T., 2010, *Religious involvement in hearing sermons. A grounded theory study in empirical theology and homiletics*, Eburon, Delft.
- Ricoeur, P., 1994, *Oneself as another*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Theissen, G. & Merz, A., 1998, *The historical Jesus. A comprehensive guide*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Thurneysen, E., 1971, in G. Hummel (ed.), *Die Aufgabe der Predigt*, pp. 105–118, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt.
- Vinet, A., 1853, *Homiletics; Or, the theory of preaching*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.
- Westphal, M., 2005, ‘Prayer as the posture of the decentered-self’, in B.E. Benson & N. Wirzba (eds.), *The phenomenology of prayer*, pp. 13–31, Fordham University Press, New York.