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An Assessment of Buttrick's Homiletic

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An Assessment of Buttrick's *Homiletic*

TIM SENSING

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Homiletic: Moves and Structures by David Buttrick was heralded by Fortress Press as "the most substantial work on the subject since the nineteenth century" and "is due to stand as a monumental work in the field of homiletics for the balance of the century."¹ The literature, too, quickly embraced Buttrick's methodology as "unrivaled in our time for its sophistication and comprehensiveness."² A review of current homiletic literature demonstrates that David Buttrick is one of several authors who represent the "new homiletics."³

In recent years, literary-critical discoveries about the form and function of scripture have caused several writers to move away from the rhetorical tradition of Augustine and the deductive method to proclaim that the inductive method should be advocated.

A survey of the literature reveals that some use the Bible as support for the inductive method.⁴ The fact that most of the Bible uses narrative to

¹David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

²Donald K. McKim, review of *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, by David Buttrick, in *The Reformed Journal* 38 (January 1988):18-22. See also Edward F. Markquart's review in *Word & World* 8 (Spring 1988):198-201; David L. Larsen's review of *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, in *Trinity Journal* 8 (Spring 1987):117-121; Francis C. Rossow's review in *Concordia Journal* 14 (July 1988):323-325; Richard L. Eslinger's in *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 22 (Winter 1988):45-47; and Thomas G. Long's in *Theology Today* 45 (April 1988):108, 110-112. The most critical of these appraisals is Francis C. Rossow's review.

³Richard L. Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), gives the most detailed survey to date of Buttrick's methodology.

⁴Ralph L. Lewis and Gregg Lewis, *Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1983), pp. 58-60. See also Dwight Kirkwood Nelson, "A Comparison of Receptivity to the Deductive and Inductive Methods of Preaching in the Pioneer Memorial Church" (D.Min. diss., Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1986):37. The Lewises have surveyed the Bible in detail to substantiate this claim.

communicate God's message suggests its preference for the inductive method.

Generally in the Bible the concrete comes before the abstract, the particulars before the general, the data before the rule. While some decrees and dogma may be found in Scripture, they tend to follow experience, examples and cases in an inductive way rather than precede them in a deductive manner.⁵

Lewis and Lewis bridge the gap between text and audience, noting that most people learn primarily from induction. "Reasonable induction from experience carries more clout for contemporary listeners than . . ." deduction.⁶

Nelson has demonstrated that the post-New Testament era in homiletics has patterned itself after the rhetoric of Aristotle. He summarizes much of the literature, concluding that the deductive method dominated the pulpit until recent years.⁷

Although, Nelson's summary is overstated, Don Wardlaw agrees: Recent theological changes have made it possible to see how preaching since the second century has been clothed mostly in prosaic dress. Prior to that time the controlling structure of Christian preaching was narrative. . . . Narrative regulated sermon design. . . . Church Fathers from Origen to Chrysostom, while endued with the mind of Christ, exegeted and preached with the mind of Plato and Aristotle. . . . The Fathers preached . . . with a rhetoric that Greeks over the centuries had developed into a science of persuasion.⁸

Nelson also surveys the most popular homiletic texts beginning with John Broadus in 1870.⁹ He found the dominant method advocated by these texts, with the one exception of J. Fort Newton, is clearly the deductive method.¹⁰ The popularity of the deductive method can also be seen in my own homiletical training.¹¹

⁵Lewis and Lewis, *Ibid.*, p. 61. See also p. 43.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 25, 32, 43.

⁷Nelson, "Comparison," 77.

⁸Don M. Wardlaw, *Preaching Biblically* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), pp. 11-12.

⁹John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, Rev. ed., Jessie Burton Weatherspoon, ed. (New York: Harper, 1944).

¹⁰Nelson, "Comparison," 19-23. Other exceptions are Ozora Davis, *The Principles of Preaching* (Chicago, 1924); and David J. Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969). Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958) sorted out the general categories of sermons from the standpoint of functional forms and organic shapes. The fifth and last of the organic types of sermon falls under the classification of "A Story Told." Davis believed that

Fred Craddock advocates an inductive method for sermon preparation and delivery.

Even if the adoption of Greek rhetorical forms for sermon outlines was a wise choice in the mission to the Hellenistic world, certainly after nineteen centuries the time has arrived for critical review of sermon form as well as content.¹²

He proposes that the form of the text should be the primary consideration in choosing the sermon form.¹³

Amos Wilder¹⁴ broke new ground for many Biblical exegetes as a champion of the field of Rhetorical Criticism. It is in his work that Craddock unearths rich soil to use as a foundation for his proposal. Amos Wilder also began a new era in parable research that has significantly affected parable research in the past two decades.¹⁵

It took almost a decade for Craddock's emphasis to gain momentum. In time, subsequent authors brought forth a host of texts advancing the cause of inductive preaching, dialogical preaching, and narrative preaching.¹⁶ It was a call for "Biblical Preaching."

not more than 10 percent of sermons being preached in the middle and late 1950s could be listed in this category.

¹¹Charles W. Koller, *Expository Preaching Without Notes plus Sermons Preached Without Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1962); H. C. Brown, Jr., H. Gordon Clinard, and Jesse J. Northcutt, *Steps to the Sermon: A Plan for Sermon Preparation* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1963); James W. Cox, *A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976); J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972); and Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

More recently Jack Reese, André Resner, and James Thompson (Abilene Christian University) and Philip Slate (Harding Graduate School of Religion) have investigated with reason and balance and also encouraged students to investigate the validity of the "new homiletic."

¹²Craddock, *Authority*, p. 153.

¹³Ibid, p. 143. See also Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp. 118, 122-123.

¹⁴Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

¹⁵This literary criticism will be examined in greater detail in the section on parables.

¹⁶Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching*, Abingdon Preacher's Library Series (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980); Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978); Richard L. Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987); Donald E. Gowan, *Reclaiming the*

David Buttrick follows this recent trend toward a new homiletic with the most complete text to date. He begins his homiletic from the ground up, laying new foundations for the field. He describes his journey in an article "On Preaching a Parable: The Problem of Homiletic Method." He concludes his autobiographical tangent:

I grew curious as to how human consciousness actually did conjoin ideas. The result was a journeying system of "moves" assembled by various "logics." When preached, such sermons did seem to heighten attention and retention in surprising ways. More, a mobile system offered freedom to fulfill intention, to alter models in consciousness, in a word, to change minds.¹⁷

Buttrick specializes in the phenomenology of language. He writes about rhetoric—about the organization of language so that it makes an impact on human consciousness. His method is a phenomenological approach in that he begins with the phenomenon of what is heard and understood by people. If "faith comes by hearing," the question of what congregations actually hear and experience when a sermon is preached is absolutely crucial. A sermon

Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980); Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972); Richard A. Jensen, *Telling the Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980); Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978); Ralph L. Lewis and Gregg Lewis, *Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1983); Academy of Homiletics, *Preaching and Story* (Des Plaines, IL: Cabrini Contact Center, 1979); Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, and Charles L. Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Edmund A. Steimle, "The Fabric of the Sermon," *Luther Theological Seminary Review* 17 (Spring 1978):50-55; Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Eugene L. Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985); Eugene L. Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons*, Abingdon Preacher's Library (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980); William D. Thompson, ed., *Preaching Biblically: Exegesis and Interpretation*, Abingdon Preacher's Library (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981); and Don M. Wardlaw, ed., *Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983). Dialogical preaching is seen in Reuel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967). Howe is one of the few authors who precede Craddock. David Lischer, in "The Limits of Story," *Interpretation* 38 (Jan. 1984):26-38, calls for balance.

¹⁷David Buttrick, "On Preaching a Parable: The Problem of Homiletic Method," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 17 (Winter 1983):18-19.

needs to be formed to function in consciousness much as thoughts themselves form in the mind.¹⁸

Buttrick criticizes the deductive approaches, because in either "textual" preaching or biblical "topic" preaching, "preachers are forced to fabricate some sort of sermon design from their own minds"¹⁹ As early as 1981 Buttrick analyzed these approaches, describing them as "homiletic systems . . . , what might be called a 'method of distillation' by which passages are reduced to single propositional 'truths.'"²⁰

He went on to suggest a different tactic, "Let us propose questions which a preacher might ask of a passage, questions which may yield different results and which may indirectly suggest a different way of 'biblical' preaching": "What is the form?" "What is the 'Plot,' Structure or Shape?" "What is the 'Field of Concern'?" "What is the 'logic' of Movement?" "What is the Addressed 'World'?" "What is the passage trying to do?" He words this last question later "What is the language trying to do?" He considers this last question as the first step to "homiletical obedience." Intentionality of the text then has equal status for biblical preaching as does content. He cautions that sermon form "need not be bound by biblical form: The how and why of form is more important than the form itself. . . . In preaching, deep structures and performative purposes take precedence over form."²¹ He summarizes his call to a new homiletic saying,

In the past few decades biblical interpretation has moved from the historical-critical paradigm toward other critical approaches, for example, structuralist, phenomenological, rhetorico-poetical. Now homiletic theory is called to similar reconstruction. When a new homiletic, tuned to hermeneutic sensitivity and a tough phenomenological analysis of language, emerges and filters down to the pastor's study, we may see a generation of preachers who find Scripture exciting and who find speaking in grace an act of radical obedience.²²

He divides his book into two parts, the first titled "Moves" and the second, "Structures." "Moves" are blocks of thought on a "single notion" or a "single conceptual idea." Buttrick contends that a congregation cannot concentrate for more than three or four minutes on any "move"; yet it takes

¹⁸"Homiletic," pp. 211-217. For Buttrick, the issue is "hearing." How you get them to hear so that words and meanings form in consciousness is the goal of all preaching.

¹⁹Buttrick, *Homiletic*, p. 336.

²⁰Buttrick, "Interpretation and Preaching," *Interpretation* 35 (January 1981):48.

²¹Buttrick, "Interpretation":50-58.

²²Buttrick, "Interpretation":56.

about three minutes for a move to form in consciousness. Within a "move," there is a weaving of three different strands of thought: theological reflections, "oppositions" or intellectual blocks in the minds of the congregation, and experiences which we all share in common.²³

A move will be opened and closed with simple conceptual language related to the meaning of the sermon's structure. Then, internal to the move will be a weaving of conceptual language with illustration or imagery related to the lived experience of the congregation. This image will be given a point of view as it is developed; it is, after all, an orienting of the communal consciousness toward a "seeing" of what is being spoken of.²⁴ Buttrick outlines exact details about how images form in consciousness and construction of moves so the congregation can participate with the preacher. These guidelines include sections on image grids, illustrations, introduction, conclusions, language, style, and point of view.²⁵

A single idea is to be "imaged"; the audience needs to see what you are speaking about. Preachers today must search the language of human conversation and find images and metaphors to proclaim the gospel anew.²⁶ In our age we may need to find new symbol and story, a new language with which to speak central Christian affirmations. We must discover the metaphor of today that communicates to this culture. This involves translation of metaphor that is analogous but more compelling.²⁷

The second half of the books concerns, "plotting":

All speaking is structural and, therefore, may be termed "plotting. . . . Because preachers are not merely expressing themselves—gushing forth—but are concerned with the forming of a congregation's faith consciousness, they will be fairly deliberate in designing the plots (moves) of their sermons.²⁸

The key to preaching for Buttrick is to ascertain how to structure the movement of sermon language so that certain patterns of understanding form in the consciousness of the hearers. The structure of the sermon will follow the structure of the text. Maybe not in content, genre, or organization, but the sermon will function as the text functions in consciousness. "Sermon structures ought to travel through congregational consciousness as a series of

²³*Homiletic*, p. 33.

²⁴Eslinger, "Review":47.

²⁵Eslinger, *Hearing*, pp. 156-157, gives an excellent summary of these guidelines for developing the internal form of a move.

²⁶Markquart, "Review":198.

²⁷David Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology*, Fortress Resources for Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 15-17.

²⁸Buttrick, *Homiletic*, p. 293.

immediate thoughts, sequentially designed and imaged with technical skill so as to assemble in forming faith."²⁹ Sequences of plots may be replotted, amplified, reduced, or rearranged with altered logic. The limitations of replotting lie with intentional fidelity ("intentional obedience").³⁰

Plots are determined by intentions. Butterick states: "The idea of intention (not authorial, but in and of the language) piqued the suspicion that sermonic speech should be designed 'to do' in congregational consciousness."³¹ Language is performative; it does something in human consciousness. In preaching, preachers replot plots and reintend intentions for a new world in consciousness.³² This is not "What did the text mean?" but "What does the text prompt us to say now?"³³ Find a model "that will relate contemporary interpretation to both original meaning and, somehow, original intending."³⁴ The "moves" and "plots," which produce different fields of understanding³⁵ should arise from the nature of scripture.

There are also "moments" in consciousness termed "immediacy," "reflection," and "praxis." Symbols function in consciousness in different ways. Since scripture functions in these different ways, sermons also are plotted to work in human consciousness to shift congregational consciousness. "Immediacy": To shift congregational consciousness with immediate force. "Reflection": To produce a reflective field of meaning. "Praxis": To move the congregation from the situation at hand to theological contemplation, to some new understanding or course of future action.³⁶

Analysis

Caution needs to be employed with Butterick for allowing his theology to dominate his methodology. His theology is rooted so deeply in the "New

²⁹Butterick, "Interpretation":55.

³⁰Butterick, "Parable":20.

³¹Butterick, "Parable":19; *Homiletic*, p. 273.

³²Butterick, *Homiletic*, p. 301. Replotting is for the purpose of meeting a new world in consciousness. "If the world intended in scripture does not appear to be alive in our age (often analogous), other states of mind may be at hand," p. 303.

³³Ibid, p. 273.

³⁴Ibid, p. 274. His three-step model is given on pp. 276-278. (1) Biblical texts are addressed to communal consciousness and not to individuals. (2) The consciousness the texts address is the "double" consciousness of being-saved-in-the-world. (3) Speaking of God, the Bible tells stories and singles out symbols. Thus the Bible must be interpreted within an interaction of story and symbol.

³⁵McKim, "Review":21. Butterick outlines in detail how one develops a sermon script from text (replotting plots) in his chapter "Structures," *Homiletic*, pp. 305-317.

³⁶Detailed definitions of these modes are given by Eslinger, "Review":46-47.

Hermeneutic"³⁷ that he easily dismisses the historical-critical analysis of the text. When the audience hears the text read, a field of understanding will emerge in the present tense. For the preacher to refer to a historical past is to split the focus of the congregational consciousness.³⁸ This leaves the congregation with no historic faith, and scripture is used only secondarily. Buttrick's symbols of revelation leave no revelation at all and no sense of the divine.³⁹ Nowhere is his opposition to the past hermeneutic as clearly stated as when he says, "We cannot endorse a prohibition against human hermeneutics prompted by some odd notion of the purity of the gospel. . . . Besides, there is no certifiable pure Christian faith for us to embrace."⁴⁰

Larsen states that the validity of any approach lies within the examples proposed.⁴¹ Buttrick states, "The Gospels were written by resurrection faith. After nearly two centuries of historical-critical research, we still cannot

³⁷A simple definition of the New Hermeneutic: The interpreter enters into dialogue with the text in order to be subjectively confronted by language and events from a different historical context. He seeks the original "language event" so that it can be translated to today with the same impact. When the language from a biblical context touches one's life in a meaningful way, it becomes truth for that person. A detailed explanation can be found in, Anthony C. Thiselton "A New Hermeneutic," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, I. Howard Marshall, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 308-333. William D. Thompson, *Preaching Biblically: Exegesis and Interpretation*, p. 66, states: "One of the most valuable insights of the new hermeneutic is its emphasis on the text as 'language event.' . . . The concerns of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs, seminal thinkers in the new-hermeneutic school of thought, lift the principle of language to that of prime importance of understanding the scriptures. Both the presuppositions and the elaborations of the new-hermeneutic view of language raise serious questions about its conclusions, but it has provoked biblical interpreters into a useful study of the role of language."

³⁸Eslinger, "Review" :46.

³⁹Larsen, "Review" :119. See Buttrick, *Homiletic*, pp. 113-116, for his definition of revelation.

⁴⁰Buttrick, *Homiletic*, p. 418. The clearest example of his hermeneutics is found in his discussion of the resurrection in *Homiletic*, p. 400. He strongly asserts that these narratives give us no description of the actual accounts. See also *Preaching Jesus Christ*, pp. 57-68.

⁴¹David Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), pp. 28-29. Larsen continues, "But he leaves the preacher no better off in the end. We have at our disposal 'the symbols of revelation' but no real revelation at all behind the symbols. There is no commanding sense of the divine given." Larsen also uses Buttrick's *Preaching Jesus Christ* as a test case. He states on p. 168, "As one whose 'new homiletic' is squarely placed in the 'new hermeneutic,' it is not surprising that throughout this work he is historically skeptical and agnostic." Larsen questions whether Buttrick has proposed a useful homiletic apart from his hermeneutic.

certify the sure facts of Jesus' life. . . . Can anyone say for certain what is 'original Jesus' and what is subsequent ecclesial reflection?"⁴²

Buttrick believes that the problem of authority is a problem of history. Since scripture is a product of history, demythologizing (translating from one world view to ours) becomes part of every preacher's task.⁴³ "The mere fact that scripture is datable questions our affirmation of scriptural authority."⁴⁴ Buttrick goes on to propose new model for hermeneutics, leaving the audience without a word from God. Objective history is left behind and faith comes only on a symbolic level, because the historical Jesus cannot be recovered.⁴⁵

Although Buttrick infers that historical research is valid by using historical-critical methods for many of his examples,⁴⁶ he attacks "original meaning" and the application of such for today.⁴⁷ He distinguishes between "history" and "plot" noting that scripture is "calculated plot."⁴⁸ This separates content from plot. He states that "structure of consciousness" is the constant for faith and not the "content of consciousness."⁴⁹

At its simplest, Buttrick poses the hermeneutic question this way: "How can words written in an earlier age to a different people have anything

⁴²Buttrick, *Jesus*, pp. 12, 23.

⁴³Buttrick, *Homiletic*, p. 241. Page 248 defines scripture as "the language the church used to describe the nature of being-saved."

⁴⁴*Homiletic*, p. 242. Buttrick uses 1 Cor.1:10-30 as a model for authority. Authority is wisdom and power found in the cross. The message of the cross (void of historical content) brings faith to consciousness to a being-saved community.

⁴⁵Larsen, *Anatomy*, p. 29.

⁴⁶Buttrick, *Homiletic*, p. 220, uses an example of how historical language can be used to form consciousness in the present tense.

⁴⁷*Homiletic*, pp. 259, 265-267. He states that scripture is to be understood by "story" and "symbol." As the being-saved-in-the-world community faces new situations in new ages, Christ, too, will be reinterpreted in ever-new ways. Our awareness of being-saved-in-the-world interprets revelation.

⁴⁸His definition of history would exclude all documents that claim to be historical. All history involves a selection and ordering of events. No historical account details in fullness an exact accounting of time and space of what actually took place. Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 88, states: "The inspired biblical authors did not, of course, write their interpretations of events according to the standards of modern, Western exactitude. To require such precise accuracy and objectivity is to impose on the authors of the Bible the limitations and fallacies of nineteenth-century standards of history writing. If the term 'organic inspiration' means anything at all, it is that God used the authors of Scripture in the framework of their own times."

⁴⁹Buttrick, *Homiletic*, p. 269.

to say to us today in a twentieth-century time and place?"⁵⁰ He criticizes the historical-critical method—as a model it “is simply not true.”⁵¹

Edgar Krentz summarizes the historical-critical method and maintains it is the best alternative for interpreters.⁵² “Historical criticism respects the historical gap and uses a method to determine as precisely as possible the significance of the words for the people then.”⁵³ Next, he places this interpretation into our history so the impact of Christian ideas shines out. He introduces this field of study by stating:

The fundamental rule of biblical exegesis is that the interpreter must be obedient to the text itself; that is, he or she must allow the texts to determine their interpretation. . . . History and exegesis are by no means the same: history tries to reconstruct the past while exegesis attempts to unfold the meaning of texts.⁵⁴

Richardson and Schweitzer summarize the steps of the historical-critical method as follow: (1) The determination of the text; (2) the literary form of the passage; (3) the historical situation, the “Sitz im Leben”; (4) the meaning which the words had for the original author and hearer or reader; (5) the understanding of the passage in the light of its total context and the background out of which it emerged.⁵⁵ These steps are necessary for all historical documents, not just the biblical ones.

The goals of the historian are (1) To present a “corpus of ascertained fact” that answers “What actually happened, and why?”⁵⁶ (2) To understand the events in order to interpret them. The historian is handicapped by his sources and cannot know all there is to know. Sources lead to a selection of what can be known. This selection is guided by what questions are being asked.⁵⁷

Historical criticism serves the historian’s need for valid, reliable evidence by enabling him to establish whether or not testimony actually

⁵⁰Buttrick, *Homiletic*, p. 264.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁵²Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), pp. 87-88. See pp. 63-67 for the fruits of the historical-critical method. He recognizes that this method is not the only valid way to read a book. *Literary Criticism* also has value, for a document does have ongoing life in the present, p. 71. See Thomas Long, *Preaching the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), pp. 11-22.

⁵³Krentz, p. 61.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, v-vi.

⁵⁵A. Richardson and W. Schweitzer, eds., *Biblical Authority for Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), pp. 241-244.

⁵⁶Krentz, p. 35.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 37.

was given by a competent and reliable witness. It is a method for collecting all possible witnesses to an era or event, evaluating what they say, relating the findings to one another in a coherent structure, and presenting the conclusion with the evidence.⁵⁸

The historian cannot be deluded into thinking that he can see anything in its original frame of reference. The historian does not have the objectivity of the natural sciences. He must look through the lenses of his own age. Therefore, he must follow rules (which is called criticism) subjecting evidence to questions. The goal is to hear the original sense of the witnesses to determine the meaning the text had for its first hearers at the time of original composition (intended sense). By using the techniques of textual criticism, philological studies, literary criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism and historical criticism, the dynamics that are at work in the production of the texts can be understood.⁵⁹

Buttrick's association with Literary Criticism comes to view while he is discussing the polyvalent meanings of words.⁶⁰ Words can either violate the author's intent or realize the author's intent beyond his own awareness. This will allow the interpreter to tap into new meanings for new and different audiences. The only limits are "Is it true?" "Is it helpful?"⁶¹

E. D. Hirsch defines autonomous language as textual meaning which has nothing to do with the author's mind but with only his verbal achievement, the object of interpretation being not the author but his text.⁶² Using Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* as an example, Buttrick states:

Can Coleridge's poem mean much more than Coleridge knew or intended? . . . Today we may read and find meanings which, clearly, could not have been in the poet's mind when he wrote. Is meaning locked into a particular time, place, and consciousness of composition, or may we extend so as to propose new meaning which may be "valid"?⁶³

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 41. For greater depth in the historical methods see, Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Books, 1953). He defines the task on p. 23, "Modern scientific history is systematic knowledge of the past; its object is man's activities in time, space, and society, expressed in a coherent report. It deals with real events and real men (not abstractions), and the causes of their activities and their influence."

⁵⁹Krentz, pp. 42-51. The interpreter must recognize his limitations. See Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" *Existence and Faith*, Schubert Ogden, ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 291.

⁶⁰Buttrick, *Homiletic*, pp. 270-271.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 271.

⁶²E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 224-235. Buttrick shows knowledge of Hirsch on p. 474.

⁶³Buttrick, *Homiletic*, pp. 269-270.

If the doctrine of semantic autonomy is true, then any reading of a text would be valid, since any reading would correspond to what the text "says" for that reader.⁶⁴ Original meaning and authorial intent set limits. If subjectivity is the only alternative, then original intent, as much as it is discernable, is the objective point of control. Authors may change their view of their own text (the significance of that text for them), but the meaning they originally intended has not changed.⁶⁵ The proper control for all hermeneutics is found in the original intent.

Hirsch argues for the author as the primary standard in determining interpretation. If words do not reflect the author's meaning, then whose? The critic becomes the author of the meaning. Meaning is an affair of consciousness, not words. Almost any word combination can represent more than one complex of meaning. Meaning derives either from somebody's meaning something by it, or somebody's understanding something from it. Hirsch demonstrates that validity of interpretation is found by saving the author and showing that the prevailing arguments against the author are questionable and vulnerable.⁶⁶

Authors write to communicate ideas so that what they mean will be accessible. Buttrick claims that there might be meaning in the writings of which the author was unaware (authorial ignorance due to being unconscious of his meaning). Hirsch would respond: (1) There is a difference between knowledge of a man's meaning and knowledge of the subject area. (2) This new meaning would require authorial confirmation to be valid. "What has been denied here is that linguistic signs can somehow speak their own meaning—a mystical idea that has never been persuasively defended."⁶⁷ Linguistic norms, at the very least, impose limitations on verbal meaning. "Verbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs."⁶⁸ The goal of interpretation, after consideration of all the evidence and the conclusions the evidence requires, is to increase the probability that this is what the author meant. Then the interpreter can determine what it means for today.⁶⁹

⁶⁴Hirsch, p. 10.

⁶⁵Hirsch, p. 8.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 3-6, 13.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 18-23.

⁶⁸Hirsch, p. 29. He does allow unconscious meaning as long as it lies within the boundary that determines the particular verbal meaning that is being considered (pp. 51, 220-221). See also his concept of "horizon," which defines in principle the norms and limits which bound meaning represented by the text (p. 223).

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 207-209.

Buttrick himself limits the canon by excluding the Psalms and other hymnic material for preaching purposes. Larsen is correct by asserting Buttrick's need to alter his homiletic in some way to accommodate this valuable material.⁷⁰ Buttrick narrows this canon further by stating: "If there are passages which cannot be preached without launched expeditions into historical background or lengthy critical excursus, they may not belong in the homiletic 'canon.'" ⁷¹ How many texts this would exclude is uncertain; however, the historical-critical interpreter would be rendered virtually textless.

Buttrick's Methodology Applied to Parables

When dealing with parables, Buttrick again contends that the traditional (rational) homiletic of the past falters. "Point-making," "situational" sermons and "conversational" sermons miss the power of the original "language event." Parables have structured plots which produce movement in consciousness enabling transformation of conviction. To reduce the parables to a single "point" turns them into static propositional truths, frustrating their intentional force. Buttrick describes his methodology as applied to parables as follows:

What parables may do is to let us enter them on our terms, to find at the outset our own rather stock understandings of self, world, and God; then, suddenly, to disrupt our world so that in the end we find ourselves translated into a mysterious new world, dimly grasped, forced to change—to rethink our lives before The Mystery. Add it up: Traditional 'Enlightenment' homiletics cannot cope with parables. If, as many scholars suppose, parables are in some sense prototypical words of Jesus, then Christ's own preaching judges our homiletic procedures inadequate. Somehow or other, we must search out a new way to speak.⁷²

Contrary to the usual understanding of parables, many reflect uncommon practices of everyday life and odd details. "While not every parable contains

⁷⁰Larsen, *Anatomy*, p. 152.

⁷¹Buttrick, "Interpretation":55. His own solution in *Homiletic* (p. 220) may give an escape for the historical interpreter. "Almost always, blocks of past-tense language can be avoided. The trick is to remember that past events are present in consciousness. A language that relates to consciousness will lead to work with present-tense." Past-tense description can almost always be brought into present consciousness. His example here is excellent.

⁷²Buttrick, "Parable":17-18. On p. 21 he states that, if it is possible for parables to be plotted, then this method is available to other kinds of biblical rhetoric. All biblical language travels intentionally by different kinds of logic; therefore, by designing different kinds of sermons with variable homiletic strategies the preacher can fulfill different intentions.

a surreal detail, a touch of the bizarre, a breach of reality, a 'verfremdungseffect' ('alienation effect'), many, many do." The unanticipated intrusion of the surreal threatens our typical world and dissolves our conventional wisdom.⁷³ Here Buttrick's existential bent becomes overtly apparent.

Parables are then to be interpreted as a "paradox of analogy and anti-analogy." Thereby our world is judged by "The Mystery" thus shattering our world. "Preachers who themselves may lust for clear propositional truths must offer none when preaching parables."⁷⁴ Instead, the preacher must allow the intentional language of the "present tense" power of the parable to "do" in consciousness to give rise to new levels of meaning.⁷⁵

Buttrick explains that texts are "plotted." This enables him to follow his theological biases by abandoning the historical understanding of the text.

Thus, preaching could be liberated from an over-zealous biblical historicism and begin to pay attention to 'plots,' trying to get at the hermeneutic consciousness that once upon a time conceived them. . . . 'Plots' in their particular sequential logic were acts of interpretation, and that periscopes could be replotted freely into sermons for a more modern age without losing track of the Gospel.⁷⁶

The preacher needs to give up the idea of original meaning so that the "present-tense" power of the parable can speak.⁷⁷

The intentional language of parables leads to a "second stage" christology, celebrating the Risen Christ.⁷⁸ Since this is the hermeneutic that transmitted the parables to the church, life comes again to these historically worn stories. Parables live in the consciousness of a Risen Christ, who reigns over his kingdom now.⁷⁹

Buttrick's method offers great potential for preachers today to reach their audiences with a relevant life-changing message from God.⁸⁰ However, his own view of scripture and the parables, in particular, strip the words of Jesus of their divine authority. Who is Jesus if there is no certifiable historical content concerning his life and teachings? The authority of the language event is found only in the Lordship of Jesus both incarnate and glorified.

⁷³Ibid.:17.

⁷⁴Ibid.:21.

⁷⁵Buttrick, "Parable":21. See also *Homiletic*, pp. 351-354.

⁷⁶"Parable":19.

⁷⁷Ibid.:21.

⁷⁸*Jesus*, pp. 69-80.

⁷⁹"Parable":21.

⁸⁰See Buttrick's example of a sermon on a parable in *Homiletic*, pp. 158-163. This sermon could be preached in most congregations in America.

Conclusion

I find Buttrick's methodology challenging. If he is right about the nature of language and how it forms in human consciousness, then many preachers will need to evaluate his homiletic. Many traditional practices will be abandoned. Some preachers, however, who do not have the background necessary to implement many of his strategies will find more useful the work of Greidanus previously cited and Thomas Long's three books *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, *The Senses of Preaching*, and especially *The Witness of Preaching*.⁸¹

Although his theological presuppositions about the nature of scripture are rightly criticized, I do not see that this diminishes his valuable contribution concerning language function. Those who caution against Buttrick's homiletic do so on the two fronts: (1) His hermeneutic gives rise to faulty handling of the text. This has been the primary criticism of this paper. (2) He fails to give documentation for his assertions concerning the nature of language.⁸² Although some have expressed doubt based on their own philological views, no one to date has produced evidence contrary to Buttrick's theories about how language functions. Further research needs to be done to verify these assertions. Any theological persuasion should be able to apply these strategies with the same results. Larsen is wrong by using Buttrick's examples as the proof of the homiletic. Even his sermon on the resurrection could be preached in most congregations.⁸³ Almost all Buttrick's theories concerning language (not his hermeneutic) can be applied to the preacher's homiletic methods.

⁸¹These works are now being used as Homiletic texts within our fellowship.

⁸²The decision to exclude the documentation was made by Fortress Press and not David Buttrick, according to John A. Melloh, review of *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, by David Buttrick, in *Worship* 62 (May 1988):267.

⁸³One sermon is not a criterion for judging the impact of the new hermeneutic on congregational faith. The key question: What is the long-term impact on faith for a congregation that hears only sermons void of historical content?