

Homiletics in the Classroom and the Pulpit

Engaging Bonhoeffer's Sermons with his Teaching on Homiletics

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Abstract

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was as active a minister as he was a scholar and nowhere did these twin roles come closer than in his training of seminarians, including at Finkenwalde. This paper explores Bonhoeffer's teaching on homiletics, identifying three key principles regarding any sermon (cause, finality and concretion) as well as his direction in terms of delivery. Given the scant detail available on these lectures (limited to the notes of former students), these ideas are then explored in Bonhoeffer's own sermons: to what extent did he preach what he taught? This paper concludes that homiletic ideas which may sound alien or frustrating to a contemporary UK hearer were ultimately the product of Bonhoeffer's fight to preserve 'real' preaching in the context of mid-twentieth century German practice.

Keywords

Bonhoeffer, Homiletics, Preaching, Ministerial Education, Ministerial Practice

Introduction

Recent scholars have suggested far more attention should be given to Bonhoeffer's preaching and teaching on homiletics,¹ even going so far as to portray Bonhoeffer as an 'homiletical theologian': one working out his theology in the pulpit.² This overstates the point, as Bonhoeffer's theory and practice of preaching is surely an outworking of his

¹ E.g., see David J. Lose, 'Bonhoeffer the Preacher', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 108; Victoria J. Barnett, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), xi–xii.

² Michael Pasquarello, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Theology of a Preaching Life* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).



broader theology, as Eberhard Bethge notes: 'While Barth came to the classroom via the pulpit, Bonhoeffer came to the pulpit via the classroom.'³

However, given the nature of the 'completely different kind of training' for ministry intended by the illegal seminaries,⁴ it is no surprise that Bonhoeffer's *Vorlesung über Homiletik* should occupy a central place within the Finkenwalde curriculum, being delivered and expanded in each of the sessions.⁵ The contribution of this paper is not to investigate preaching in the whole of Bonhoeffer's theological vision (though we will, intermittently, observe connections), but specifically to explore and evaluate some implications of his Finkenwalde homiletics teaching in the light of his own *practice* of preaching.⁶ By considering some of the cultural and theological contexts in which he was working, the core elements of that homiletic will be identified.

Lecture

'The word of God alone possesses its own, inherent purpose,' teaches Bonhoeffer, identifying the foundation of his lecture. For Bonhoeffer, *Word* will almost always refer to Jesus Christ (not Scripture), so the purpose of preaching is to bear the crucified Christ into the church-community. Of course, in Bonhoeffer's broader theological understanding, that congregation is already Christ-existing-in-community (this major theme of Bonhoeffer's work is most fully worked out in *Sanctorum Communio*),⁷ yet as the testimony of the apostles is spoken amongst Christ's fragile and fallible people, he (as the true witness) becomes once more real and present to the hearer.⁸ In this sense, preaching is not a mere presentation of theology, but a sacramental event, born in the pulpit, shaping Christ's visible body. Bonhoeffer's language is not that of 'creating' the congregation (who already exist in Christ, as above) but 'mediating' or 'bearing' God's presence through the concrete Word to the Church.⁹ (This paper will return to such 'concretion' later.)

Where Luther longs that congregations would 'believe that the preacher's words are God's Word...',¹⁰ Bonhoeffer agrees and therefore reminds that will only be true when the

³ Dean Garrett Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 39 (cf. footnote 120).

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer and H. G. Barker, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, vol. 14, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 253 (henceforth DBWE).

⁵ DBWE 14, 487–536.

⁶ Two recent publications demonstrate the current interest in exploring the related place and contribution of Scripture within Bonhoeffer's wider theological scheme: Ross E. Jamieson, *Bonhoeffer as Biblical Interpreter: Reading Scripture in 1930s Germany* (London: T&T Clark, 2021); Joel Banman, *Reading in the Presence of Christ: A Study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Bibliology and Exegesis* (London: T&T Clark, 2021).

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, vol. 1, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

⁸ DBWE 14, 504, 534–35.

⁹ DBWE 14, 496; Stroud, *Hitler's Shadow*, 40.

¹⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works* (St Louis: Concordia, 1957), 526.

sermon itself is 'commensurate with Scripture.'¹¹ This gives rise to two key concepts running through the lecture: *Cause* and *Finality*.

By *cause*, Bonhoeffer indicates that the sermon must originate in (and only in) the Word. Despite the turbulent world in which he delivered this lecture, he insisted the 'more apparent historical [*geschichtlich*] situation' can only ever be the context into which a sermon is spoken, never the content or 'subject' of the sermon itself.¹² Similarly, 'the pastor's own pious consciousness or experience' may not initiate the sermon,¹³ but only the text of Scripture.

In like manner, the text is also the aim of the sermon, its *finality*. Compared with a desire to preach a sermon which might edify, educate, instruct or convert, Bonhoeffer maintains 'the particular goal of any individual sermon is that *the text itself* come to expression.'¹⁴ In the first sermon of his London ministry, he declares: 'This is what makes a sermon something unique in all the world, so completely different from any other kind of speech. When a preacher opens his Bible and interprets the word of God, a mystery takes place, a miracle: the grace of God, who comes down from heaven into our midst and speaks to us, knocks on our door, asks questions, warns us, puts pressure on us, alarms us, threatens us, and makes us joyful again and free and sure.'¹⁵

In this theology, the task for the preacher is exposition, not application. The preacher has no need to prescribe the focus of Scripture in a hearer's world but should rather 'let the Bible loose' such that Christ himself will be present and work among the congregation.

In short, Bonhoeffer picks up Barth's questioning of the nature of objectivity in reading Scripture, finding *Sachlichkeit* within the text itself. He then extends that logic 'into the realm of the church.' That is, a sermon is only genuine when the Word of God is spoken 'in and as the Church.'¹⁶

From this theological grounding, Bonhoeffer's lecture explores two practical implications.

First, he has much to teach his students about the process of preparing to preach.

He details the shape of a week which should lead up to the sermon, including times alone and times of engaging with parishioners¹⁷ – indeed, his year in Barcelona had taught him the value of relationships with the congregation.¹⁸ He also explores a range of options for choosing the text on which to preach, and though his conclusion is '*any biblical text*' he

¹¹ DBWE 14, 497; Michael Mawson, 'Scripture', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 125–26.

¹² DBWE 14, 493–94.

¹³ DBWE 14, 490.

¹⁴ DBWE 14, 497, emphasis original.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, K. W. Clements and I. Best, *London, 1933–1935*, vol. 13, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 323.

¹⁶ Derek W. Taylor, *Reading Scripture as the Church: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Hermeneutic of Discipleship* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 5–6.

¹⁷ DBWE 14, 495–96.

¹⁸ Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 36.

appears to prefer a *lectio continua* approach.¹⁹ The chief elements of suitable preparation though, were prayer and meditation.

Because sermons are to present neither the preacher's personal opinion nor the actions of people, but to declare God's work, the preacher must begin with prayer if the sermon is to offer truth to its hearers.²⁰ What's more, prayer works within the preacher too: enabling a proper humility before the task, fluency in delivery and strength once the sermon is over.²¹

Within this context of prayer, the key task is meditation upon the text: 'One is not searching for new ideas or homiletic or exegetical insights,' but first for a 'personal appropriation' of the witness. A second stage of meditation will then enable the preacher to identify how the text might be conveyed to the hearers.²²

This skill of biblical meditation was a central element of the training at Finkenwalde, with half-an-hour given to its practice daily. Initially this was done in silence, with a number of the students finding it a burdensome and difficult practice. Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann complains that too often 'the text did not speak to us, and if it did, it was in our own voice.' Bonhoeffer's accommodation to their struggles was to suspend the silence occasionally, that together they might learn from each other how the text might be their master: 'All of us had been too much bent on exegesis and application of the text. We had not known what it means that the word preaches itself.'²³ Though many carried this particular element of the daily programme as a frustration, Bonhoeffer determined that it must remain a cornerstone of the community's life in preparing preachers for ministry.

Second, Bonhoeffer gives his attention to rejecting what he calls 'rhetoric' or 'style' in the preparation and delivery of a sermon. Throughout the lecture, he condemns a number of such elements. Specifically, for Bonhoeffer:

There is an appropriate pitch of *language* in preaching: 'The word of God is itself the exclamation point that we do not need to add.' As the sermon is to bear Christ to the people (rather than shape an argument), overly-logical speaking is unnecessary. The vocabulary should be neither too extravagantly (sacrally) elevated nor over-familiar, for one removes the preacher from the hearer, while the other suggests a false kind of naturalness. Here, Bonhoeffer commends Luther again: 'Severe restriction of the word, moderation: avoid all excess. The word must exert its weight.'²⁴

Rhetorical flourishes (noise, pathos, appeal to teary emotions) are evidence of an ill-prepared and insecure preacher. If the diligent work of prayerful attention to the text has been done, the word itself will be powerful enough, without recourse to such displays.²⁵

¹⁹ DBWE 14, 499–500.

²⁰ DBWE 14, 494.

²¹ DBWE 14, 490, 494, 507–8.

²² DBWE 14, 494.

²³ Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Collins, 1966), 108.

²⁴ DBWE 14, 506–7.

²⁵ DBWE 14, 496–97.

Rehearsal of sermons should be avoided, since this 'seriously risks turning a prepared sermon into a declamatory sermon. This is 'wholly inappropriate': the posture of formal oratory being the antithesis of a humble preacher bowing before the word.²⁶

Set forms of sermons should be rejected. The sermon is not a mould into which the text is poured, rather the sermon should serve the text. To insist on a fixed sermon structure is therefore to disregard the form of the text itself in favour of an externally-derived model of oration.²⁷

Extended Introductions must also be foregone. 'An overly general, dull introduction ruins the entire listening experience, and people will quickly fall asleep. ... The best disposition derives from the text itself: generally begin with the beginning of the text and conclude with its conclusion.'²⁸

Finally, *stories* should be sparingly used, not only perhaps because they draw attention away from the text, but also for the danger of being misconstrued: 'If you do employ stories, then above all they must be true.'²⁹

We might summarise the overall thrust of these comments as a rejection of the classical rhetorical method. Bonhoeffer gives some attention³⁰ to Augustine's threefold purpose of preaching (based upon Cicero): to instruct, gladden and move the hearer, but he does so to reject the ensuing approach of fixed-form sermons. His rallying cry throughout is: '*Get in people's faces with the text itself!*'³¹

Couple this refusal of 'rhetoric' with the underlying theological convictions that the sermon must begin and end in the text's world and not the hearers' (*cause* and *finality*) and a Bonhoeffer sermon might threaten to sound quite unfamiliar, even unpalatable, by the standards of today's preaching.

Twenty-first century UK preachers are certainly encouraged to avoid 'trite, trivial, meaningless, banal, boring or longwinded' language; but also to find a 'hook' to catch attention at the outset, to rehearse sermons before delivery and make use of gestures, looks and other rhetorical devices (questions, pauses) throughout.³²

Bonhoeffer's lecture would surely reject the explicit employment of some of these rhetorical devices, yet he remained a sharp critic of dull sermons: railing against the 'uninspired and scandalously boring' sermons of his Barcelona supervisor and denouncing as 'shameful ... shallow religious babble' a sermon from his *Doktorvater*.³³

²⁶ DBWE 14, 506.

²⁷ DBWE 14, 498.

²⁸ DBWE 14, 498.

²⁹ DBWE 14, 498.

³⁰ E.g. DBWE 14, 500–1.

³¹ DBWE 14, 498.

³² David Day and M. Day, *A Preaching Workbook* (London: SPCK, 2004), 74–75.

³³ Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 37 and 64 – in the latter case, quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, C. J. Green and D. W. Stott, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928–1931*, DBWE 10 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 205.

The *Vorlesung über Homiletik* can only take us so far. Bonhoeffer's original notes are no longer extant, so today's reader is reliant solely on the notes taken by his students. Bethge notes the value of the teaching: 'These were homiletical lessons that few ordinands elsewhere had the opportunity of hearing ... There were few students who did not return to their preaching and their congregations changed and happier ... who did not grow in confidence.'³⁴ Yet, with the various expansions and adaptations between the Finkenwalde sessions, it is hard to identify an entirely full and comprehensive account of the teaching.

Documentation of Bonhoeffer's own sermons, however, is fuller and more reliable. Not only have many of his sermons been preserved in type- or handwritten form (including in his own handwriting), but such records span the full range of his ministry and career, giving a broader vista over his homiletic than the single point of his Finkenwalde *Vorlesung*. (Within the DWBE series, the title of each sermon is accompanied with a footnote, identifying the source material for what is represented. In many cases an original manuscript has been annotated either by the author or by a subsequent compiler, such as Eberhard Bethge.)

On that basis, this article will now turn to the sermons themselves to continue its evaluation and engagement with Bonhoeffer's taught homiletic. What can be learned from his praxis?³⁵

Sermons

Language. It is hard to assess (through translation and at a distance of up to 95 years) the quality and pitch of Bonhoeffer's language / vocabulary, though it was certainly varied.

In his first Barcelona sermon (1928), he spoke from Rom. 11.6 on the soul's restlessness, breaking into some of the most soaring language of any of his sermons (even though the attempt he is describing here – that of the soul's own efforts to attain the divine – he will subsequently denounce as futile): 'the most grandiose and most gentle of all human attempts to attain the eternal from out of the anxiety and restlessness of the heart – is religion. The eternally puzzling, unsettling element is sought and found, and placed into an abiding relationship and the most secret contact with the soul, until the soul itself has become eternal.'³⁶

At the earthier end of a spectrum, he powerfully preached in England of 'Christ, the poor son of a labourer from the East End of London.'³⁷

³⁴ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography: Theologian, Christian, Man for his Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 443.

³⁵ In a piece of this length, a full and comprehensive survey of a twenty-year ministry is impossible. Though the sermons identified here do span that period, particular attention will be given, where possible, to especially significant ones: e.g., the first in a new ministry (Barcelona, London) or those at key moments (Bonhoeffer's examination for ministry).

³⁶ DBWE 10, 482.

³⁷ DBWE 13, 343.

Indeed, Pasquarello notes a development in Bonhoeffer's language during his Barcelona ministry: as he deepened his relationships with the congregation, so his preaching shifted 'toward language that was more personal and social, less abstract and individualistic.'³⁸

It should be noted that the reception Bonhoeffer's sermons received was somewhat disparate. The majority of commentators are positive: see, for example, Pasquarello's endorsement of a growing gift above, or Max Diestel (Church Superintendent in Berlin) commenting that Bonhoeffer's preaching showed 'great assurance and vitality' in 1927.³⁹

Others, however, used different terms. Wilhelm Niesel notes an astonishing 'dryness of its style' having heard Bonhoeffer speak, whilst Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann gives a mixed report. He describes Bonhoeffer's lectures as 'quite unsentimental, almost dispassionate, clear as crystal, with a certain rational coldness' and continues: 'It was the same with his sermons.' But of the election of a new minister within his father's church, Zimmermann describes the trial sermons of the two candidates, and expresses astonishment that Bonhoeffer was passed over in favour of someone whose preaching was perhaps more 'typical' of the day, yet measurably less engaging.⁴⁰

It is challenging to settle on a clear picture from these reports, yet it is apparent throughout that when Bonhoeffer preached or taught, he firmly held his hearers' attention, as Ferenc Lehel describes: 'We followed his words with such close attention that one could hear the flies humming.'⁴¹

Rhetorical flourish. Albrecht Schönherr (a Finkenwalde student) reported: 'In his sermons he avoided any rhetorical effect. He never gave us anecdotes in them ... there was not a word too many.'⁴²

Bonhoeffer was well-able to deploy metaphor, describing a 'house of mourning',⁴³ fog rolling in on a beautiful landscape,⁴⁴ the eleventh hour of the church's life⁴⁵ or the 'hell of hopelessness'⁴⁶ for example. Such metaphors rarely dominate a sermon, however, with Bonhoeffer preferring to stay closer to the imagery of the text itself (see, for example, the journey from peace to love in his Rom. 5.1-5 sermon in Groß-Schlönwitz in 1938).⁴⁷

³⁸ Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 54.

³⁹ Barnett, *Collected Sermons*, xv.

⁴⁰ Zimmermann, *Bonhoeffer*, 146, 62, 66–67.

⁴¹ Zimmermann, *Bonhoeffer*, 68.

⁴² Zimmermann, *Bonhoeffer*, 128.

⁴³ DBWE 10, 582.

⁴⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Victoria J. Barnett, M. S. Brocker and M. B. Lukens, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work, 1931-1932*, DBWE 11 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 437.

⁴⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, L. L. Rasmussen, I. Best and D. W. S. Higgins, *Berlin: 1932-1933*, DBWE 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 439.

⁴⁶ DBWE 12, 455.

⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Victoria J. Barnett and D. Schulz, *Theological Education Underground, 1937-1940*, DBWE 15 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 471–76.

Neither is Bonhoeffer shy to use poetry or hymnody on occasion, most frequently to introduce or end a sermon (e.g., his sermon on 1 Thess. 5.16–18 for his Second Theological Examination in 1930 ends with a stanza from a 1653 hymn *Ist Gott für mich, so trete*).⁴⁸

Of course, comment on Bonhoeffer's use of physical gesture is near-impossible, though perhaps it is hard to imagine an entirely static delivery of lines such as: 'We clap our hands to our foreheads and say, how could such a thing be possible...!'⁴⁹

One striking element worthy of further exploration is how similar some of Bonhoeffer's preaching comes to the form and style of Pauline rhetoric. For example, Paul's letter to the Romans is acknowledged to include two substantially different rhetorical styles in alternation: first, a calm, ordered, logical exposition of Paul's gospel; then a hotter, more passionate defence of his claims. This latter style employs short, sharp sentences, rhetorical questions, repetition and so on.⁵⁰ From early in his career, Bonhoeffer demonstrates he already has these skills within his homiletical arsenal. Preaching on Easter Day, 1928 in Barcelona: 'What does this mean? How are we to understand this? A multitude of questions emerge. What does physical resurrection mean? What about the empty grave? The appearances? A multitude of questions – prompted by curiosity, by our inquisitiveness..., by mystery-mongering...';⁵¹ or for his Examination Sermon in 1930: 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. What kind of words are these? Words of a man who knew nothing of life? For whom everything was gentle and peaceful and friendly? Not at all...'⁵²

Set Patterns. Having forbidden the conforming of preaching to fixed sermon structures, it is indeed hard to discern any particularly common pattern across Bonhoeffer's preaching ministry. It is only in London that a planned 'sermon series' can be identified (four weeks in 1Corinthians 13),⁵³ presumably given his lack of sustained pastorates throughout his life.

In a very striking sermon at Finkenwalde, on Psalm 42, Bonhoeffer intersperses his reflections on successive phrases of the psalm with congregational singing of a verse from various different hymns.⁵⁴

Perhaps the most significant development in this area though, is the emergence of a much more consistent form of sermon upon appointment to Finkenwalde. With the exception of those sermons preached at weddings and funerals, almost all sermons here follow more explicitly the direction he gave to his students. At Finkenwalde, he tends to work his way, line-by-line through his text and comment as if each were the next heading in his sermon. This pattern is not absent from his earlier ministry, but previously he often either chose much shorter texts (giving the sermon a direct focus, for example his first

⁴⁸ DBWE 10, 579.

⁴⁹ DBWE 13, 326.

⁵⁰ David G. Peterson, *Commentary on Romans* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 10.

⁵¹ DBWE 10, 499.

⁵² DBWE 10, 574. (Note the very Pauline 'by no means' at the end of this quotation!)

⁵³ DBWE 13, 375–400.

⁵⁴ DBWE 14, 845–54.

sermon on return from New York in 1931 is a stunningly rich exposition of 'Your steadfast love is better than life,' Ps. 63.3),⁵⁵ or preaching on a central idea arising from the passage (e.g. his next sermon, November 1931 (Luke 12.35–40), leans on the picture he paints of the 'blessing' for the one who is awaiting the Lord).⁵⁶ From Finkenwalde onwards, his approach more explicitly begins 'with the beginning of the text and conclude[s] with its conclusion.'⁵⁷

Introductions. Again, Bonhoeffer remains fairly true to his own rule of avoiding lengthy, general introductions. No entirely consistent pattern to his 'openings' can be discerned, but a number of approaches do emerge. For example, he sometimes opens by indicating the biblical writer (the pious old psalmist in a 'struggle of near desperation' when preaching on Ps. 63, as above; or Jeremiah as one 'not eager to become a prophet of God' on Jer. 20.7).⁵⁸ At other times Bonhoeffer opens with a comment recalling his first engagement with the text.⁵⁹ Chiefly though, he will either begin with the text itself, or with a summary of the text's message: above all, the aim is clear – get to the text quickly.

Of course, this means some exceptions stand out all the more clearly: an extended reflection on the nature of 'Memorial Day' in Berlin, 1932⁶⁰ or a deconstruction of the value of New Year Resolutions consuming a full half of his sermon on 1 January 1934 in London!⁶¹ Nevertheless, these remain striking by their irregularity.

Stories. Bonhoeffer makes rich use of the biblical story within his own preaching (for example, in a 1932 baptism sermon on 1 John 4.16, he deploys Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan to describe the oft-interrupted path of love⁶²), but limited use of other stories. He does offer an occasional imagined conversation⁶³ or recount proverbial situations which 'will be familiar to all.'⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer will also make reference to other art forms (such as paintings of Mary,⁶⁵ or the Prophets⁶⁶). But outside his early, children's meditations (where he allows himself a far greater licence to illustrate with story and image)⁶⁷ any use of 'story-telling' is, once more, rarely the focus of a sermon for any length of time.

Exploring Bonhoeffer's sermons also enables a more nuanced understanding of *cause* and *finality*.

⁵⁵ DBWE 11, 401–8.

⁵⁶ DBWE 11, 408–15.

⁵⁷ DBWE 14, 498. This shift can be observed throughout his sermons in DBWE 14 and on into many of his meditations through DBWE 15 also.

⁵⁸ DBWE 13, 349.

⁵⁹ DBWE 10, 446.

⁶⁰ DBWE 11, 419–27.

⁶¹ DBWE 13, 347–49.

⁶² DBWE 11, 442.

⁶³ E.g. DBWE 11, 406.

⁶⁴ E.g. DBWE 11, 465.

⁶⁵ DBWE 13, 342.

⁶⁶ DBWE 14, 855.

⁶⁷ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, M. Nebelsick, H. Pfeifer, P. D. Matheny, M. D. Johnson, C. J. Green and C. J. Kaltenborn, *The Young Bonhoeffer, 1918–1927*, vol. 9, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 456–70.

His sermons definitely pick up the immediate context. Returning from the USA in 1930, reflecting on the privations of the inter-war period, Bonhoeffer opens his Examination Sermon with these words: 'Anyone returning to our homeland today from an extended stay in a foreign country immediately notices that today's Germans look different from other peoples and probably also different from the way they themselves looked earlier.'⁶⁸

Later (preaching in London), he addresses Luke 13.1–5 shortly after the Nazis had murdered over two-hundred political rivals. He notes the shocking similarity with the biblical passage and uses the sermon to re-define true worship within the church-community.⁶⁹

More strikingly, it is very hard to hear these words (from a 1932 sermon on John 8.32) without the image of Hitler's own speechifying in mind: 'Today it is not difficult to speak of freedom, and to speak of it in a way that the passions of a German are aroused and set everything in him a quiver, making him forget everything else. There may be some in today's Germany who, like the captive Israelites of long ago, deeply absorbed in their thoughts, dream of nothing other than of freedom, who see its image in great visions and grasp for it...'⁷⁰ – Bonhoeffer then demonstrates that 'biblical' freedom is of a very different order.

Questions directly challenging the church come within Bonhoeffer's sights, such as a 1933 sermon on Matt. 16.13–18 which rails against the self-indulgence enabling his hearers to deny their obligation to defend the true church.

Still further objects of his preaching come from the more general topics of discussion, as, for example, when he preaches following a Welsh mining disaster in 1933.⁷¹

Undoubtedly, Bonhoeffer wants to press home the truths about God into individual's hearts. In his very first sermon, on Luke 17.7–10 (October 1925 in Stahndorf), Bonhoeffer demonstrates the background of this text is Christ coming to 'shake people out of this Pharisaic self-satisfaction' and identifies that same attitude with humanity's ongoing attempt to 'grab God's omnipotence and holiness with unholy hands...'⁷²

In his Examination Sermon he turns the words Paul wrote to the 'model' Thessalonians onto his hearers with a series of questions: 'But to us? ... What do we know of such Christian joyfulness...? What do we know of the good news...?'⁷³

Over and again, his 'application' is not to present a list of tasks for the congregation to complete, but to adjust their understanding of the God who is present with them, and so to shape their understanding of themselves too (e.g., 'Learn to recognize this sign in your own life...').⁷⁴

⁶⁸ DBWE 10, 573.

⁶⁹ DBWE 13, 365–70.

⁷⁰ DBWE 11, 467–68.

⁷¹ DBWE 13, 337; cf. Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 124.

⁷² DBWE 9, 451–52.

⁷³ DBWE 10, 572–79.

⁷⁴ DBWE 12, 459.

What then, can be made of all this? Bonhoeffer's apparent rejection of 'rhetoric' in his teaching is tempered by a judicious (and skilled) use of some aspects in his preaching. Likewise, he teaches a hesitancy around engagement with the world as the ground of a sermon, yet in the pulpit, interacts deeply with his hearers and their lives.

If this appears problematic, it is so when viewed from today's perspective and in isolation from his broader theology. A clearer picture emerges when viewed through the lens of the preaching from Bonhoeffer's own time.

Contexts

The 'modern preaching' of Bonhoeffer's day was the product of Schleiermachiian theology and the historico-critical method.

Schleiermacher teaches that religion is only 'real' or 'grasped' as it can be described – or 'felt' – in space and time: the extent to which it is *experienced*.⁷⁵ This demands a homiletic which is 'life-oriented and practically applicable, touching the happenings, feelings, and experiences of people.'⁷⁶ In terms of hermeneutics, then, Schleiermacher's attention was given to how 'receptivity' and 'spontaneity' may be bound together, that is, engaging both 'the publicly available meanings' of language and 'the intention of the speaker,' to understand the speech (or sermon) of another.⁷⁷

This approach thrived under the dominance of historical-criticism within the German academy, where an analytical approach to Scripture comes to the pulpit in the form of seeking a 'life-lesson' for the congregation.

The implementation of this 'modern preaching' was a broadly topical approach, aimed at a bourgeois congregation who sought 'a beautifully crafted, learned, and moral speech by an educated pastor with the status of a civil servant' who could pair their 'literary expertise' with the 'inward experiences and (self-)interests of an audience.'⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer viewed this as a missional deficit of the church as it failed to bring the gospel into contact with the lives of 'ordinary people.'⁷⁹

The size of the gulf between Bonhoeffer's approach and this liberal historical critical method is entertainingly described by no less a figure than Gerhard von Rad as he recounts an encounter between the two men. Bonhoeffer had been in the Jena auditorium when Professor von Rad had been expounding Psalm 51 and giving special attention to the final verses being a later textual addition. On the way to lunch following the lecture, Bonhoeffer

⁷⁵ Jacqueline Mariña, 'Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto', in John Corrigan (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 457–58; see also Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), 42–46 for Kant's underlying influence here.

⁷⁶ Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 19.

⁷⁷ Jacqueline Mariña (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4–5.

⁷⁸ Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 19, 30.

⁷⁹ Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 29.

and von Rad discussed the need for such an historico-critical approach, a quarrel about which von Rad exclaims: 'I did not in the least understand my companion. ... Nowadays I would more easily comprehend his concern without giving up mine. But perhaps it was unavoidable that our conversation should run on such narrow lines.'⁸⁰

Bonhoeffer observed something similar during his first visit to America. Arriving just one year after the Wall Street Crash (and the ensuing depression) and into the foremost school of progressive liberal Protestantism/social thought, the US and German contexts differed significantly, but as a student at Union Seminary he 'was struck by the fact that the American theology student "knows much more about the things of daily life."⁸¹ The corollary was what Bonhoeffer considered a lamentable ignorance and inability in the core tasks of theology.

He observed the same pattern in American preaching: 'the question of truth was viewed largely in light of the practical community. Sermons are "edifying narrations of examples, willing proclamation of their [preacher's] own religious experiences."⁸² The sense, again, was for an effective truth, truth which *works*.

Set against these contexts, Bonhoeffer's approach was clearly emerging in the homiletical 'counter-current' Von Rad describes.⁸³ This was the revolution initiated by Karl Barth, for whom all knowledge of God resides in the revelation of the Word: 'Religious experience is our human, and therefore our very questionable, relation to God.'⁸⁴

In that light, Bonhoeffer extends the Barthian principle in a Lutheran direction and argues for cause and finality residing in the text itself as the determination for a congregation not to experience the sermon, but to experience the presence of Christ which the preaching bears into their midst: 'The word of the Bible assumes form as a sermon; thus it goes out to the congregation in order to bear it. The preacher must permit this autonomous outgoing of the Word toward the congregation to occur and not hinder it.'⁸⁵ The preacher's task is not to make clear their own intention, but to give expression to the text itself.

Further, Bonhoeffer's reticence about the employment of rhetorical tools can also be better understood in this context. Where practitioners around him are offering their oratorical expertise to their congregations, Bonhoeffer is underlining Barth's claim that the 'gospel brings the end of religion as a human message, form of seeking, spiritual experience, or moral consciousness.'⁸⁶ No human form of speech can ever capture the

⁸⁰ Zimmermann, *Bonhoeffer*, 177.

⁸¹ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 159.

⁸² Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 71; quoting DBWE 10, 307.

⁸³ Zimmermann, *Bonhoeffer*, 177.

⁸⁴ Karl Barth, E. C. Hoskyns and W. P. A. Hoskyns, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 366.

⁸⁵ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 443.

⁸⁶ Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 58.

gospel, but as it speaks the Word to the Church, Christ's presence becomes real: so here the focus must remain.

Conclusion

In his first London sermon, Bonhoeffer described the cause of church decline thus: 'It is because we ourselves have made the church, and keep on making it, into something which it is not. It is because we talk too much about false, trivial human things and ideas in the church and too little about God. It is because we make the church into a playground for all sorts of feelings of ours, instead of a place where God's word is obediently received and believed.'⁸⁷

That is, preaching forms the nature of a church. Reflecting on his American experience, Bonhoeffer describes the church fed on socially-oriented sermons as practically a social corporation.⁸⁸ This challenge was sharpest at home, however. The church is to find its existence in discipleship to the present Christ: 'It is not at all expected to find its existence in the ethnonationalistic [*völkisch*] element or any other such entities.'⁸⁹ Yet the dominant mode among the *Deutsche Christen* was a positivist accommodation to the false gospel of the Nazi Party.⁹⁰

For Bonhoeffer, this happened when broad and expansive ideas were abstracted from Scripture, and so are able to merge with (for example) the nationalistic tones of *Blut, Erde, Volk*. Again, topical preaching enabled the addition of 'a steady diet of political rhetoric' to some biblical language, to harness the desires and anxieties of the German people.⁹¹

The Confessing Church's task (and so that of the preachers he is training at Finkenwalde) is to preach the text with a maximum 'concretion'.

Here then, is where Bonhoeffer's homiletic is most firmly rooted. *Concretion* is Bonhoeffer's word for the text engaging the world as the preacher demonstrates God's presence in the hearers' lives. 'Is not this hunger and thirst for reality, for becoming incarnate, for *living* the Christian life and not merely *talking* about it the real key to Bonhoeffer's message?'⁹² The image of a sermon as a shiny red apple offered to a child, or glass of cool water to the thirsty is Bonhoeffer's most famous description of this concretion,⁹³ perhaps because it so vividly demonstrates the true nourishment which

⁸⁷ DBWE 13, 323.

⁸⁸ Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 72.

⁸⁹ DBWE 14, 491.

⁹⁰ See Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 132, for an account of Barth's 'emergency' homiletics seminar in the face of these developments.

⁹¹ Pasquarello, *Preaching Life*, 112–13.

⁹² Visser 't Hooft is quoted here from Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Augsburg: Fortress, 2004), 6.

⁹³ DBWE 11, 443.

offering people the 'simple' Word of God – the real, and not merely the 'effective' truth – entails: 'God and God alone is what is ... concrete in a sermon.'⁹⁴

This notion of concretion, then, is perhaps also Bonhoeffer's most distinctive contribution, in the light of which some of the suspected tension between his teaching and practice fades away. Concretion cuts the contemporary categories of 'exposition' and 'application' in a different and more unified (and therefore, meaningful) way.

That is, Bonhoeffer's is a theological, not pragmatic homiletic: interpreting God's concrete action for the world – specifically asking, as throughout all of Bonhoeffer's ministry: 'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?' While the specific contextual challenges of preaching in twenty first century UK may differ from mid-twentieth century Germany, that call for concretion would surely still stand: unrestrained human speech will tend to abstraction, so sermons must begin and end with the Word, revealing His presence within the church-community – thus shaping the true Church.

⁹⁴ DBWE 14, 493.