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Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract: *Based on new empirical studies this essay explores how churchgoers listen to sermons in regard to the theological notion that “faith comes from hearing.” Through Bakhtinian theories presented by Lorensen and empirical findings presented by Gaarden, the apparently masked agency in preaching that infuses faith can be described as a polyphony of voices, which is not limited to the liturgical room or the sermon, but is activated by it. This polyphony creates a room, where the churchgoers, through different kinds of dialogical interaction (categorized as associative, critical, and contemplative) create new meaning and understanding. It is not a room that the listener or the preacher can control or occupy, but a room in which both engage.*

The preacher as facilitating an implicit dialogue: the empirical perspective

How do churchgoers listen to sermons when they participate in services? The traditional protestant theological conviction ascribes an inherent religious function to the listening process, as “faith comes from hearing” (Rom 10:17).² In the original Greek text, the verb “come” is not explicit, but it has nevertheless been understood as “comes” in the 3rd person singular. Our question is: Who or what initiates this faith to *come*? The sentence “faith comes from hearing” is an indirect passive construction which masks the primary agency of faith. It seems imply that God is behind the mask, as only God himself can inspire faith. However, the passive construction of the sentence is open to interpretation. How are we to understand this masked agency in preaching? In this article we will suggest that this agency can be interpreted in accordance with the way contemporary people listen to preaching.

The empirical survey at the heart of this essay is a part of Marianne Gaarden’s Ph.D. dissertation in progress. The project includes 29 interviews with churchgoers from five different churches and five interviews with the corresponding ministers.³ The churches are all part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.⁴ As the survey is based on qualitative,

¹ Gaarden teaches homiletics at the Pastoral Institute in Aarhus. She is the co-author of *Pastoralteologi* (Copenhagen: Anis, 2007), and *Gudstjenesten: En antologi* (Aarhus University Press, forthcoming 2013) This article is a part of Gaarden’s Ph.D.-dissertation forthcoming 2014. Lorensen is visiting scholar at Duke University Divinity School in the period 2012-2013. She is the author of *Preaching as a Carnavalesque Dialogue - between the 'Wholly Other' and 'Other-wise' Listeners* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming 2013).

² The Greek text (Nestle-Aland 26th edition) is: “ἀρα ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἀκοῆς, ἡ δὲ ἀκοὴ διὰ ῥήματος Χριστοῦ”. Direct translated: “Then faith [comes] from hearing, and hearing through [the] word of Christ”. In the *21st Century King James Version*, it is translated: “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God”. In NRSV “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”

³ The research was designed the following way: Right after the sermon, the pastor announced from the pulpit that he or she was participating in this project. When the churchgoers left the service, they were handed a piece of paper with the three questions: 1. What did you experience in the worship? 2. What did you hear in the sermon? 3. What did the sermon do to you? In this way, the informants (the unpredictable number of people who were willing to give an interview) had the opportunity to write down their answers immediately after the service. These answers formed the basis of the interview, which lasted approximately one hour and took place either the same day or the day after.

⁴ In October 2012, 79.2% of the Danish population was members of this church.

not quantitative data, the research does not aim at representation, but at variation.⁵ The used methodology is inspired by grounded theory in which every attempt is made to operate with no preconceived set of theoretical statements.⁶ The raw empirical data have formed the categories, which emerged inductively during the process of analysis. This methodical approach allows unexpected categories to arise, and some of these unexpected results will be presented here.

It is our hope that the results of the empirical analysis presented here, though situated in a Scandinavian context, transcend this cultural and ecclesial context and might be helpful in illuminating the kind of sermonic interaction that takes place in other settings too. A recent Dutch empirical study,⁷ which also uses qualitative interviews and grounded theory, takes another epistemological and theological starting point; it presupposes the act of listening to sermons to have a religious dimension.⁸ We do not assume the process of listening to have a religious dimension. Instead, we investigate what happens when churchgoers interact with the sermon, and put the results in relation to the theological conviction which ascribes the listening process an inherent religious function.

Empirical surveys like the ones described in the present article can easily be categorized and criticized for being inclined to take a liberal theological position, because they emphasize the dominant roles inner words/dialogues play for individual meaning-making in the practice of preaching. Such categorizations, however, reveal the epistemological assumption of the critic, namely the notion that human beings have access to an objective truth about God *outside our own prior understanding*. This thinking, however, has been contradicted by the last two hundred years of epistemological understanding of human reasoning.⁹ It is impossible to think, understand, or talk about God independent of our own thoughts and understandings. We understand theology as an interpretative enterprise within which the divine revelation is interpreted by human beings who are always situated and contextually bound – bound to their own assumptions, concepts, and language. As human beings do not have access to an objective divine truth, the subjective, situated self has to create meaning and interpret the truth in relation to her own context.¹⁰

This is exactly what the churchgoers interviewed did when they listened to sermons. They created their own meaning in a dialogic interaction with the sermonic discourse interwoven in the entire service. It is striking that the churchgoers tended to describe their impression of the minister, when they were asked about the sermon. Thus, the first impression of what remained in the churchgoers' memory right after the service was the

⁵ As a consequence the congregation was chosen with respect to wide geographical, demographical and size dispersion and the preachers with respect to variation in gender, age and theological starting point.

⁶ Grounded theory (first formulated by Barney G & Strauss, Anselm L. in: *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, (Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company, 1967)) is a widely used general methodology in social science for developing theory that is grounded in data, systematically gathered and analyzed. The methodology aims to produce theoretical statements about empirical data in a way that these statements reflect the patterns in the data. The theory seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions but also to determine how the actors under investigation actively respond to those conditions, and to the consequences of their actions. (Corbin & Strauss 1990) A computer program for data-processing, called NVivo, has been used for coding of the transcriptions of the interviews.

⁷ Theo Pleizier: *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons: A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics* (Eburon Academic Publishers Delft 2012)

⁸ We find it problematic, using grounded theory with no category in advance and at the same time presuppose something religious happens in the act of listening to sermons.

⁹ A tradition beginning with Emanuel Kant's epistemology and further extended in the phenomenology (Husserl) and the hermeneutics (Weber).

¹⁰ In order to be consistent we use the personal pronouns 'she,' unless it is a quotation from the interviews then original pronoun is kept.

experience of the preacher as a person, who was evaluated according to her degree of authenticity.

The simple question of whether the churchgoer *liked* or *disliked* the minister had a surprisingly strong impact upon the churchgoer's experience of the entire service and the act of listening in particular. In this sense, the churchgoers indicated that their *relation* to the preacher was essential to their construction of meaning.¹¹ Preaching involves a reciprocal relation, because it is something the churchgoers and the preacher share; the preacher depended on the congregation's willingness to interact with the sermon, and the churchgoers' meaning-production depended upon an authentic preacher. Accordingly, the preacher was important for the churchgoers, as the relation was crucial to their personal meaning production in dialogical interaction with the sermon.

Confronted with the foreign words used by the preacher, different kinds of dialogical interaction took place inside the churchgoers in order for them to produce meaning, understanding, or create a state of being. The degree of creativity of this interaction was so profound that the preacher's sermon, transposed to the listeners' context, even could seem like a new sermon with a different semantic meaning. Throughout the interviews the preacher was perceived as an interlocutor for this dialogical discourse. This was clearly expressed by one churchgoer, a 53-year-old woman working as an assistant professor. She talked about the crucial importance of the preacher's person by emphasizing the dialogical nature of the reception of the sermon:

That is because it is . . . a dialogical form, where I communicate with the [preacher] [laughs]. . . . But nevertheless it is a communication which takes place, and why should I engage into the dialogue if the person communicating the message does not stand behind his words or is speaking from his heart?

In her mind, she was conversing with the preacher, even though she did not say anything out loud. Another churchgoer, a 66-year-old man who participated in a service in a prison church, where the culture is less controlled and formalized, did not refrain from entering into explicit conversation:

And I tell her, if I disagree with her. Then I interrupt the sermon by saying "it's not quite right," and then she tries to convince me. . . . Sometimes we disagree wildly, but then you would have heard! . . . I would have opposed her.

In this way, he also indicated that his listening process took the form of a dialogue, even though he did not use the word dialogue. He was simply blunter and would interrupt the sermon and turn it into an explicit dialogue, if he felt that there was a need for it. The utterances of these two informants, representing different cultures, backgrounds, and contexts - an associate professor and an inmate - reveal this consistent feature in the interviews: that listening to the preacher's voice activates, at a cognitive level, the churchgoer's personal flow of thoughts, which in different ways is triggered by her dialogical interaction with the sermon.

This interaction was described as a dialogue causing a struggle to create personal understanding and meaning. When the churchgoers were asked about what they have heard of the sermon, they expressed what they had been thinking in relation to the fragments of the sermon they had actually heard. It was almost impossible to disentangle what the listeners

¹¹ The significance of the ethos of the preacher in a Danish context appears to be similar in a North-American context: "*The 'Listening to Listeners to Sermons Project'* . . . , discovered that sermon listeners hear more and hear better when they believe they can relate to their preacher in meaningful ways" (McClure 2012).

had heard, which the preacher had actually said, and what the listeners had been thinking, activated by their encounter with the sermon. What the churchgoers remembered and reported was completely interwoven with and inseparable from their own thoughts in dialogue with the sermon. What remained in the memory of the churchgoers was not what had actually been said from the pulpit, but their personal meaning production, activated by dialogical interaction involving the listener's own life situation and existential reflections.

It was the encounter or clash of the preacher's foreign words and the churchgoers' own understanding, often based on preconceptions or personal experiences, that activated, induced, or even provoked the subjective production of meaning. Thus, the words of the sermon were processed in an implicit dialogue, contextualizing and adjusting the words to the listeners' own thoughts. When the preacher's ethos was granted such significance, it was because the preacher's personality was one part of the reciprocal relationship that influenced the internal dialogue taking place between the listener and the preacher. The character of the relation was essential for the subjective production of meaning of the churchgoers. The preacher's personal interpretation of the Gospel presented in the sermon appeared to create a room for dialogical interaction. The preacher had no control of this room, as the subjective meaning-production was not controlled by the preacher's intentions. Nevertheless, the preacher played a crucial role as facilitator of this room.¹²

Churchgoers as primary authors of preaching: the theoretical perspective

In previous works we have explored ways in which others, different from the designated preacher, influence contemporary preaching practices and, in that sense, can be seen as co-authors. Some of the guiding questions for these studies have been oriented toward how preachers expose their preaching practices to interaction with their listeners and how homileticians might incorporate this other-wisely co-authored impact in homiletic theories.¹³

Although it is an ongoing quest to explore to what extent churchgoers have an active, creative impact on the sermonic discourses of preachers, the present empirical studies have caused us to shift our perspective away from the agency of preachers toward that of churchgoers. In recognition of insights gained through recent qualitative interviews with listeners of preaching¹⁴ our aim is to unfold possible theological and homiletic implications of the thesis that *churchgoers are to be understood as the primary authors of preaching and that preachers have the role of co-authors*.

Gaarden's empirical survey documented how different kinds of dialogical interaction with the heard sermon were essential for the subjective meaning production and experience of churchgoers. The creativity of this interaction was so profound that the sermon the listeners referred to after the worship service often appeared as a different – and sometimes even totally divergent – discourse compared to the one held by the preacher. The implicit dialogue that churchgoers refer to when describing their experience of listening to sermons stands in significant contrast with traditional notions of communication as a one-way transfer from an active speaker to passive listeners.

¹² The preacher is only partly facilitating this interactive event as also many other factors in the entire worship contribute to this process, as the hymns and singing, the church room with other churchgoers, prayers and readings, the liturgy with the Eucharist etc.

¹³ Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, *Preaching as a Carnavalesque Dialogue - between the 'Wholly Other' and 'Other-wise' Listeners* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming 2013) and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, "Carnivalized Preaching - in Dialogue with Bakhtin and Other-Wise homiletics," in *Homiletic: A review of publications in religious communication* 36(1, 2011): 26–44.

¹⁴ Primarily Marianne Gaarden's empirical study, but central insights from this study are confirmed by the project Listening to the Listeners Project lead directed by Ron. J. Allen, et al.

The empirical documentation of listening to preaching as a matter of dialogical interaction, rather than one-way reception, resonates deeply with the studies of literary critic, communication theorist, and dialogue philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin.¹⁵ The critical engagement displayed by the listeners makes good sense when analyzed in light of Bakhtin's epistemological studies, indicating that "understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other."¹⁶ Analyzing the empirical material of listeners of preaching through the lens of Bakhtinian theories of dialogicity leads us to rethink the roles traditionally assigned to preachers and listeners in the practice of preaching, particularly the question of agency and authorship.

Dialogue is crucial, not only to human communication but also to human processes of reasoning and understanding according to Bakhtin. Rather than see dialogue as a pedagogical product based on individual reasoning, he describes how dialogical interaction and the words of others provide the epistemological foundation for creative thinking and the development of individuals.¹⁷

Bakhtin is of particular value for studies of the complex genre of preaching, because he combines sociolinguistic understandings of how people communicate in everyday life with literary analyses of how authors like Fyodor Dostoyevsky and François Rabelais orchestrate ideas, characters, events, and social circumstances in creative ways. Bakhtin's emphasis on authorship transcends the field of literary texts, because he pursues the question of authoring in everyday life where meaning emerges in the interaction of embodied dialogue partners.¹⁸

Bakhtin categorizes everyday communication and interaction as *simple speech genres* in contrast to the *complex* genres, such as preaching and essays, in which the response of one of the dialogue partners is usually indirect or delayed. Crucial to this distinction, however, is the claim that the way we communicate with each other in everyday life functions as a prism through which we can analyze the relationship between the other and the self as well as more complex genres, such as preaching.

Addressees play either explicit or implicit parts as co-authors of the written as well as oral discourses according to Bakhtin's analyses. In this sense, "the listener becomes the speaker."¹⁹ Since addressees always play a co-authoring part, the crucial question is whether the primary author approaches that part dialogically or monologically. The determining difference between monological and dialogical approaches depends on whether the words of the other are allowed to transform the architecture, or if they are used simply as scaffolding, which might be used as stepping stones in one's own development, but are not allowed to have a lasting impact on the discourse itself.²⁰

This other-oriented approach to epistemology and communication, emphasized by Bakhtin, causes two of his primary interpreters and biographers, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, point out the relationship between his communication theory and theology:

Bakhtin's insistence on the necessity of "understanding" the position not only of the other but of all others, by adding communication theory to theology, extends the meaning of Christ's biblical injunction to treat others as we would be treated

¹⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin lived in Russia from 1895-1975.

¹⁶ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" In: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* Michael Holquist (ed.) (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 282.

¹⁷ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Emerson and Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 67-68.

¹⁸ Clark, Katerina & Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1984), 88.

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 202.

²⁰ Bakhtin: *Dostoevsky's Poetics* 187.

ourselves, to take on, in other words, the role of others with the same depth of sympathy and understanding that we bring to our own perception of ourselves. In Bakhtin's system this is not merely a moral imperative but an epistemological requirement.²¹

From the Bakhtinian perspective the activity of dialogical authorship is comparable with architectonic engineering. The successful building depends on a strong as well as flexible relationship between the other and I. The authorship of a text corresponds with the development of human existence, which develops in continuous interaction between the self and the other. In order to keep this relationship flexible and strong, communication and co-authorship are central to the development of human life, relationships, and texts.²²

Recent homiletical studies have explored ways in which preachers invite addressees into conversations about biblical texts in order to work collaboratively on preaching preparation.²³ The present empirical study, however, has encouraged us to reverse the perspective and investigate how and to what extent churchgoers allow preachers, among others, to have a dialogical input on their inner reflections, or implicit sermonic discourses during the polyphonic event of preaching.²⁴

Three kinds of interaction: the empirical perspective

In light of Bakhtin's emphasis on dialogue as crucial to processes of understanding, it makes sense to understand the interviewed churchgoers as the primary authors of the sermon. This authorship, evident in all the interviews, emerged from the listeners' interaction with the sermon that caused an internal dialogue. This dialogue can best be described as a polyphony of *voices* interwoven in the listening process. One churchgoer, a 63-year-old man working as a journalist, illustrates this polyphony, the perspectives of which often shift:

I've heard this before also in relation to other texts: that you have to take care of your neighbor. Well it was a fantastic picture in the text to build upon. . . . In fact, I think the text was interesting because it is commonly known – or at least the idea that a poor life on Earth is a ticket to Heaven, and this perspective has been used politically against Christianity. . . . But we can all of us and the church as well, try to be better persons and live in accordance with the essence of the faith.

This churchgoer moved quickly through a chain of associations in dialogue with only a small fragment of the sermon: take care of your neighbor. First, he identified the topic of the sermon in other texts, then he evaluated the text, considered the effect of the text in history, and subsequently he interpreted the text in his own way, concluding what the church and the congregations ought to do. This is very different from what the preacher said. Through this polyphony of voices, he created his personal understanding of the sermon, making him the primary author of the sermon.

The character of the polyphonic dialogue gathered into three clusters, which can be categorized as: *associative*, *critical*, and *contemplative* (unlike the first two, the last category

²¹ Clark & Holquist: *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 208.

²² Clark & Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 64.

²³ John S. McClure, *Other-wise preaching: a postmodern ethic for homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

²⁴ Polyphony is a phenomenon that Bakhtin takes from its original musical setting where it is used to describe one of several ways of creating harmonies. In a polyphonic performance several melodies are sung or played at the same time by different voices.

is less or even non-cognitive). The first two categories were the most frequent, but the third was also found in some of the interviews, and there were clear traces of this contemplative modus in many of the other interviews. Although the categories are listed as three separate categories here, they rarely appeared in isolation. More often they dynamically overlapped. Thus, the churchgoer could move from being associative to critical and back again to associative or suddenly move to the contemplative modus.

Associative interaction: the empirical stance

The first and most frequent interaction was the associative way of reasoning. The meeting with the preacher's foreign words activated a chain of associative thoughts. In this chain of associative thoughts the churchgoers drew upon their own life experiences and preconceptions in order to explore personal understanding and meaning. Often only one or a few fragments of the sermon – an image or a sentence – which initiated the chain of thoughts, stimulated the churchgoers' associations. What they remembered was the history of the personal authorship generated by association, sometimes far from the semantic contents of the sermon.

The two churchgoers quoted above, the assistant professor and the inmate, described this listening process very accurately. (Both are cited here, because they were the only ones who expressed meta-reflections on their reception of the sermon). The 53-years-old female assistant professor says:

When I listen to the sermon, it is a combination of listening and thinking. I hear something, and if it really affects me or has an impact on something which I'm already occupied with . . . then I continue to elaborate on it for a while by going on another path for myself. That's fine. And then I come back thinking, 'where are we now?'

The 66-year-old man who worshipped in prison expressed himself in a similar way:

When you are listening, you get derailed in a way, and then suddenly you get caught by what is said . . . then your thoughts rush away, and in a moment you are inattentive to what has been said – and then you form your own version.

The two churchgoers express a central characteristic of all the interviews: it was the churchgoers' personal thoughts that mattered and were referenced. Listening to a sermon implied thinking oneself into the listening process, which was always situated in the context of the informant's life. When the churchgoers recounted what they had heard, they recounted their associative reflections, considerations, and evaluations in dialogue with the parts of the sermon they had heard and experienced. Understanding and meaning were constructed by means of association.

This was emphasized by a common feature of the interviews: the churchgoers talked about issues not raised in the sermon, but in their own minds. For instance, a 55-year-old preacher had talked about justification by faith. In the interview he said that he hoped the congregation had heard that the Gospel is for real sinners – not simulated sinners. A 63-years-old male churchgoer working as a blacksmith compared the concept of justification to his understanding of the Muslim concept of justification. During the sermon he had been dwelling on a Muslim anthropology, even though the preacher had not been talking about Muslims or other religions. It was the churchgoer's inner constructed meaning, a result of his encounter with the preacher's outer words, he referred to, when he recounted what he had heard in the sermon.

An interesting aspect of the churchgoers' associative reasoning was identifying – not

answers – but questions. The churchgoers used the statements of the sermon to personally attempt to identify questions, regardless of whether they understood, accepted, or adopted the preacher's point of view. Their encounter with the preacher's words stimulated the churchgoers' search for personal understanding, expressed in new questions. In different ways, the preacher's foreign words encouraged the churchgoers to formulate personal questions, even though this was not the preacher's intention.

A 38-years-old male preacher described the normative aim of one sermon as follows:

. . . one is to paint Christ here and now for the congregation, so that he becomes present, so they can receive him and take him with them. Preaching has to take place so that the Gospel is heard and received.

This preacher's congregation included a 44-year-old churchgoer, a professor of art and father of a child who was baptized. He explained in the interview that he attended service to be refilled. When he was asked what he was filled with, he answered questions which he would not have asked himself and which would not have appeared in his mind by reading newspapers or watching television. What the churchgoer received and brought with him was not the preacher's painting of Christ or understanding of the Gospel, but the churchgoer's personal questions:

I feel very much that when I myself can hear the questions, . . . then the following week is characterized by them. How they are constantly in my thoughts. I see the questions in different places, and hopefully, and very often, I will find the answers to the questions during the week. . . . Therefore, the sermon most of all activates me . . . causing me to seek answers.

In this prominent way, the churchgoer demonstrated from an empirical perspective how the Gospel is heard and received, namely as an implicit dialogue, encouraging the listener to seek answers. The churchgoer's personal authorship was not limited to the service of the day, but is best described as an ongoing search for meaning. Other informants explained in similar ways how they transformed the clearly formulated statements or messages of the sermon into questions, leading to new trains of association and attempts to answer the questions.

This questioning did not lead to either acceptance or rejection of the preacher's message, but encouraged the churchgoer to look for personal answers. Thus, the empirical findings do not support the existentialistic tradition of interpretation deriving from Rudolph Bultmann and Søren Kierkegaard, which emphasizes the encounter with the Gospel as a moment of personal decision making. Instead, the encounter activated a series of associations in a search for personal meaning.

Associative interaction: the theoretical stance

Corresponding with the churchgoers' descriptions of their implicit dialogical interaction with the preacher, Bakhtin emphasizes the constructive importance of alterity and outside perspectives in human communication and understanding.²⁵ With the focus on otherness Bakhtin suggests that rather than try to understand something foreign through empathic identification, speakers as well as listeners, benefit from encountering one's dialogue partner from the outside as another actively 'authoring' subject:

²⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 7.

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning; they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. . . . Without one's own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched"²⁶

Bakhtin's analysis of the importance of foreign perspectives is developed in connection with his critique of an epistemology that aims at total identification between the other and the I. Dialogical understanding of a foreign person, or ancient text, depends, in this understanding, on the irreducibility, rather than the identification of both participants. Whether the author/ sees the addressee as her own 'alter ego', creating him in the author's own image, or tries to leave herself behind in order to identify or sympathize with the other, Bakhtin claims that constructive, fruitful understanding cannot be reached:

In what way will the event be enriched if I succeed in fusing with the other? If instead of two, there is now just one? What do I gain by having the other fuse with me? He will know and see but what I know and see, he will but repeat within himself the tragic dimension of my life. Let him rather stay on the outside because from there he can know and see what I cannot see or know from my vantage point, and he can thus enrich essentially the event of my life.²⁷

The fact that people who communicate can rarely completely identify or empathize with each other is interpreted in terms of the outsideness of each participant's perspective.²⁸ This outside perspective is seen as a constructive distance by Bakhtin, since it implies a surplus of views and, thereby, creative understanding.

In light of the Bakhtinian descriptions as well as empirical findings concerning the ways in which churchgoers enter into associative dialogues with the heard sermon in order to create their own sermon we suggest seeing the role of the preacher as "theological reflector".²⁹ The theological reflector may try to "paint the living Christ" before the eyes of the listeners. Yet, rather than copy and "take home" the preacher's image of Christ, as one of the interviewed preachers suggested,³⁰ churchgoers seem to project their own presuppositions and life experiences onto the reflector and grasp those associations that return in more or less fruitfully disturbed shapes. In this way, both the churchgoers and the preacher's original discourse are transformed in the encounter with the foreign perspective and turned into something new.

²⁶ Bakhtin, "Response to a Question", 7.

²⁷ Tzvetan Todorov's translation of Bakhtin's passage from "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity." Cf. Todorov, Mikhail Bakhtin: *The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 108.

²⁸ Cf. Bakhtin's description of the role of outsideness in the intersubjective encounter in Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 22–23.

²⁹ We are indebted to Deborah Organ from the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics who in the presentation of her paper "Preaching as Apocalyptic Interruption" at the Academy of Homiletics meeting in Chicago, Nov. 15th.- 17th 2012 suggested the image of theological reflector for preachers.

³⁰ This is described in the section Associative Dialogical Interaction: the Empirical Perspective by the 38-year-old male preacher who was interviewed about his own intentions with the sermon.

Critical interaction: the empirical perspective

According to the Bakhtinian interpretation, churchgoers will never completely be able to identify or empathize with the preacher's outside perspective. This theoretical explanation is fully documented by the empirical findings and emphasized in the second category of interaction: *the critical voice*. Some churchgoers expressed a direct critical response, generated by their encounter with the outer words of the sermon. The outer words of the sermon clashed with their inner understanding, and as a consequence the listening event was formulated as objections and took the form of an implicit critical dialogue. The internal objection activated a search for alternative understanding and meaning. This critical dialogue was always situated in relation to the churchgoers' comprehension, which seemed to be constituted on the basis of either *preconceptions* or *life experiences*.

The critical response based upon preconceptions was most likely not to be moved by the encounter with the sermon, while the one based on life experience was more fluent and willing to be moved in the dialogical process of reasoning and understanding. It was remarkable, however, that regardless of whether the critical dialogue related to preconceptions or life experiences, the churchgoers were the primary authors of the sermon and the preacher served as interlocutor, facilitating dialogue. Consequently, the preacher was perceived to give a personal interpretation of the biblical text, rather than recount the Word of God as a God-given objective truth. This did not mean, however, that some of the churchgoers did not operate with an objective truth given by God and revealed in the Bible. Nevertheless, they also considered the preacher an interlocutor they could respond to critically.

In this way, a 74-year-old retired woman, listening to a radio-transmitted service,³¹ explained that she turned off the radio when the preacher did not speak the Word of God. Asked how she could determine whether it was the Word of God or not, she answered that the spirit told her. And to the question how she did know it was the spirit, she answered, she had learned that in Sunday school as a child. Her critical response was related to her own preconceptions and she was not willing to be moved in her critical dialogue – she simply stopped listening by turning off the radio.

This listener was typical of a few churchgoers who related their response critically to their pre-conceptions. Following a Bakhtinian understanding of dialogical authorship, it “depends on a strong, though flexible relationship between the other and I,” which was not found in the critical dialogue with regard to the churchgoers' own preconceptions. These churchgoers operated with an objective truth given by a metaphysical God and revealed in the Bible, which they had direct access to. From their point of view, the Bible was an unambiguous text, which they could identify and empathize with, and in that sense they were in control of the truth and unwilling to be moved.³²

It was notable, however, that the critical responses to the sermon (regardless of whether the listeners referred back to their own preconceptions or life experiences) were not necessarily identical with the critical perception of the preacher. The churchgoers could express great appreciation of the minister and still be critical toward the sermon. What primarily decided the churchgoers' sympathy with the minister was whether the latter was considered authentic. One churchgoer, a 63-year-old female social worker, valued the preacher, but at the same time she listened to the sermon and responded critically to it by relating it to her own life experience:

³¹ Eight of the 29 interviews were informants listening to a radio-transmitted worship.

³² A correspondingly critical voice could here draw parallel to Martin Luther's concept of the unambiguous text (*sola scriptura*), when he in Worms 1521, stated that all doctrines and dogmata of the Church not found in Scripture should be discarded.

I thought, this can't be true, she (the preacher) knows someone like this . . . , you project it to your own experiences: 'Do I know someone who is like this?' I don't think so, it can't be true, there is no-one like this.

In this case, the churchgoer was moved and she ended up accepting the words of the preacher after critically evaluated them. The criteria for the evaluation process were the churchgoers' life experiences. Churchgoers who were accustomed to going to church from childhood had a tendency to relate their critical responses to their preconceptions. These preconceptions were likely to be based on an understanding of the Bible as an external authority, containing one objective truth to which they had direct access. Listen, for example, to this 46-year-old inmate:

Sometimes . . . I move into another story about how the text actually is supposed to be understood. Sometimes I feel like I am in contact with those who wrote it [and it is as if they are saying]: "Hey listen, this might be what the text says, but that's not how it should be understood.

Churchgoers who had not gone to church regularly in childhood had a tendency to draw on their life experiences in their critical dialogue. It is noteworthy that these experiences were not just everyday life experience, but were more likely to be existential life experiences, such as loneliness, forgiveness, to be sinful, to be in love, etc. What constituted the persuasive element of the sermon that could move the churchgoer in new directions was not the Bible as an authority, but their internal critical dialogue, producing new meaning by relating the sermon to their personal life experiences.

The above churchgoer, the 44-year-old professor of art, is a good example of this; he created his own version of the sermon through critical dialogue, relating what he had heard to his childhood experiences. He was aware that his interpretation differed from the preacher's and that he elaborated on the sermon. He improved on the picture the preacher had painted in the sermon to make it suitable to his own experiences.

In the sermon based on Luke 16:19-31, Lazarus and the rich man, the preacher said that there was a gap between Heaven and Hell, making it impossible to move from one to the other. The churchgoer, however, explained that he filled the gap with water in his imagination, even though he knew that it was not what the preacher had meant; it was important for him to bridge the gap between Hell and Heaven. He created an analogy based on the fact that it was possible to see from one place to the other. By means of association he identified Hell as loneliness; here lonely people could look into Heaven and see people in community. In the interview he explained how he as a child had experienced loneliness and felt isolated, standing on one side of a gap that separated him from the people around him. Obviously it was important for him to make his way out of loneliness and become part of a community. In his imagination, Jesus filled water into the gap, making it possible to pass to the other side. When asked what the water was, he answered forgiveness. Yet the preacher never mentioned the words loneliness, community, or forgiveness in the sermon.

This churchgoer demonstrated some typical features of the critical interaction: the listener expressed great appreciation for the minister, but at the same time he was critical toward the sermon, as he was unable to identify or empathize with the preacher's outside perspective. The listener's private sermon was activated by his encounter with the preacher's foreign words and constructed through implicit critical dialogue in his search for personal understanding and meaning. The new understanding of the sermon emerged in relation to the listener's personal life experiences. The churchgoer's own sermon differed radically from the preacher's sermon, and the listener was aware of this different semantic meaning. But it was

not the actual sermon that counted for the listener; it was the new created meaning. The sermon was seen as disturbing outer words that crashed with inner convictions, creating a third new meaning. The churchgoer expressed a longing for being disturbed in his own way of thinking, triggering new meanings and broadening his perspective upon life; that was actually why he attended church.

Critical interaction - the theoretical perspective

Churchgoers describe the importance of their interaction with the preacher for their experience of preaching, yet at the same time they refer to a discourse that echoes their own life experiences more than the sermon held by the preacher. Furthermore, preachers seem to initiate a process that is crucial for the listeners, but which they are unable to control. These insights prompt us to explore what the relationship is between the preacher's outer, authoritative words based on canonical texts and the listeners' inner associations and life experiences.

The empirical descriptions of how churchgoers' responses to preaching varied depending on whether their disagreement with the preacher emerged out of theological/dogmatic preconceptions or personal life experience can be analyzed in light of Bakhtin's reflections on human development. According to Bakhtin, human selves are shaped in a continuous creative struggle³³ to integrate one's own experientially based "innerly persuasive words," with "outer authoritarian words" in the sense of dominant discourses of religious, political or other authorities.³⁴ Although Bakhtin describes the sharp contrast between inner and outer words, he also accentuates that even what we perceive as our own words and new insights are in fact products of an on-going creative interaction between the words of the self and the other:

. . . the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is, freely, developed, and applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses.³⁵

From a theological perspective, Bakhtin's description of inner, persuasive versus outer, authoritarian words resonates with medieval and Reformation discussions of the *verbum externum* and *verbum internum*.³⁶ In the Danish Lutheran tradition, in which the present interviews were conducted, there is a tendency to emphasize that it is through the *verbum externum* of the gospel, preaching, and sacraments, rather than in the *verbum internum*, in the sense of individual introspection, that one can find assurance of God's grace.³⁷

³³ Bakhtin, *Dialogical Imagination*, 342.

³⁴ Bakhtin, *Dialogical Imagination*, 345.

³⁵ Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 345-346.

³⁶ See also Barth's interpretation of Luther's description of the *verbum externum* in relation to preaching in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (London and New York: T&T Clark, 1989), 121-122.

³⁷ This understanding was confirmed by one of the interviewed preachers, who summarized his understanding of the relationship between human requests and the address of the word as "the liturgy of the Prodigal Son".

Unfolding this understanding he emphasized the crucial role of God's outer, authoritative word over the inner

Although various systematically theological analyses of the relationship between outer and inner words have been performed they tend to be ideologically oriented. As a consequence, their descriptions of what preaching ought to be, from a theological perspective, often ignore the empirical evidence that listeners of preaching rarely, if ever, rely exclusively or unilaterally on either outer or inner words.³⁸

In our interpretation, Martin Luther's critique of the movement labeled the Spiritualists³⁹ and their emphasis on the inner convincing word, on the one hand, and the Roman Catholic Church's emphasis on outer, institutional means, on the other, seemed to recognize the importance of the tension between the two. Luther described the dialectical tension between inner and outer words and means of grace⁴⁰ in ways that appear comparable both to the way contemporary listeners interact with preaching and to the way in which Bakhtin describes the dynamic tension between outer, authoritative and inner, convincing words in the process of human development and cognition.

If we interpret Gaarden's empirical findings in light of traditional understandings of the relationship between language and experience, they appear to contradict several linguistic, philosophical, and theological understandings. Within the theological field, Gerhard Ebeling claims that experience is constitutive of language, whereas George Lindbeck argues that language has primacy over experience.⁴¹

On the one hand, Gerhard Ebeling interprets language as an outer articulation of an existential event. Ebeling interprets the work of Martin Luther in an existentialist/expressivist way that gives him reasons to claim that "the authority to use the language of faith is a matter of experience. Language arises only from experience."⁴² On the other hand, cultural-linguistic interpretations, as described by George Lindbeck, regard experience and meaning making as derivative from grammar and language. Lindbeck claims that "Instead of deriving external features of religious language from inner experience, it is inner experiences which are viewed as derivative."⁴³

When we interpret the empirical findings of people who listen to preaching we cannot confirm the claims of any of the camps claiming that either language is derived from experience or that experience is derived from language, as if there was a one-way influence from one to the other. Instead, it seems to us that it is in the clash between an outer, authoritarian discourse and inner, convincing experiences that meaning is born and develops.

This empirically based interpretation can be supported by the works of Bakhtin and his colleague Voloshinov, who criticize both "individualistic subjectivism" whose proponents sees language as a product of subjective experience and "abstract objectivism"⁴⁴ which

words: "One could view one's [sic!] service as a kind of drama . . . that we come there as the Prodigal Sons that are bestowed with grace again and again and listen to this word about the free grace."

³⁸ A recent exception to this tendency has been conducted by the German theologian Alexander Deeg in *Das äußere Wort und seine liturgische Gestalt. Überlegungen zu einer evangelischen Fundamentalliturgik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011). In this *magnus opus* Deeg bypasses traditional inductive and deductive approaches to theological practices by engaging an 'abductive' method for analyzing the *outer word* in relation to its liturgical embeddedness in a Protestant tradition.

³⁹ Represented by Andreas Karlsstadt (1486–1541); cf. Martin Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten, von den Bildern und Sakrament* (Google eBook: Uhart, 1525).

⁴⁰ For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between the outer and inner word in the works of Martin Luther, see Alexander Deeg, *Das äußere Wort*, 74–76.

⁴¹ Ebeling's and Lindbeck's theological positions draw upon the linguistic studies of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Ferdinand de Saussure, cf. Vitor Westhelle, "Communication and the Transgression of Language in Martin Luther," in *Lutheran Quarterly* (2003), 13–16.

⁴² Ebeling quoted in Westhelle, "Communication," 13.

⁴³ Lindbeck quoted in Westhelle, "Communication," 13

⁴⁴ Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Harvard University Press, 1986), 48.

regards subjective experience as derived from objective norms of linguistic grammar. Rather than give primacy to subjective, spontaneous, or objective, authoritative language, Bakhtin suggests that *situated communication* is what constitutes meaning making, not language *per se*. In order to understand human communication we must thus analyze the situated conditions under which utterances emerge, because all utterances are embedded in concretely embodied interactions.

Contemplative interaction: the empirical perspective

The clash between the disturbing outer words of the sermon and the inner conviction does not only generate new meaning, it sometimes also seems to have the capacity to generate a state of being, which leads us to the third category of the churchgoers' interaction during the preaching event: the *contemplative* response to the sermonic discourse.⁴⁵ The concept of contemplation, which can be traced back to the Desert Fathers in the third century, has been practiced and defined differently in the monastic tradition.⁴⁶ Despite the different interpretations, understandings of contemplation as a modus of perception do have common features. It can be described as a state of being without words; instead of describing the contemplative person as having a dialogue with God, thinking of God, or creating images of God, she can be said to dwell in God. Through prayer and meditation people in the monastic tradition try to center themselves by being in the presence of God, quietly, without words or thoughts.

The contemporary German theologian, Ingolf U. Dalferth, operates with the concept of 'contemplative thinking,' which he describes as a kind of philosophizing. This philosophizing appears to transform the self during contemplation. It does not change the object of philosophizing, but it does change the subject who is doing the philosophizing.⁴⁷ The empirical findings indicate that churchgoers can experience something similar to this contemplative state of being while listening to a sermon. Some of the interviews clearly bore witness to this interaction, and traces of such interaction could also be identified in other interviews.

The word *dialogue* can seem misleading here, as contemplation is defined as non-verbal perception. Nevertheless, we use the concept, because the contemplative perception described by the churchgoers was caused by (Greek: δία) words (Greek: λογος). The contemplative interaction emerged not so much at a cognitive level as a response to the specific sermon, but emerged rather from the sermon's situatedness in the entire event of worship. The fact that the sermon was embedded in a liturgical service supported by church music, hymns, prayers, rituals, and especially the Eucharist, and surrounded by a congregation attending the service in a specific room at a specific time obviously played a crucial role for this category.

The churchgoers were influenced by the preacher's words, which stimulated mental

⁴⁵ The category of contemplation was not used directly by any of the informants. The category has been selected due to our interpretation since the informants emphasize on experiences of non-cognitive modes of transcendence. Comparable non-cognitive ways of responding to worship services has been described by ritual theorists with emphasis on physical embodiedness and situatedness. See Catherine Bell: *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), Bent Flemming Nielsen: "Ritualization, the Body and the Church: Reflections on Protestant Mindset and Ritual Process" In: Religion, *Ritual, Theatre*, Nielsen, Holm & Vedel (eds.) (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Verlag, 2009).

⁴⁶ Mursell, Gordon Editor: *The Story of Christian Spirituality. Two thousand years from East to West*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 204-205, 212, 339; Lawrence, C.H., *Medieval Monasticism* (Singapore: Longman, 2001) 1-5 & Williams, Rowan, *Silence and Honey Cakes. The wisdom of the desert* (Oxford: Medio Media, 2004)

⁴⁷ Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Die Wirklichkeit des Möglichen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 56.

activity, but this led to a form of transcendence, which meant that the churchgoers could barely clarify what had happened in their minds. They could account for their thoughts before their minds took off, but after this point they used words like: dreaming, meditating, transcending, being in another state of consciousness, or just being somewhere else. A chain of associative or critical thoughts often preceded this contemplative modus. Like this churchgoer, a 46-year-old male inmate and former teacher:

I was thinking there is something that bothers my ears. It may well be that the text is presented in that way, but that is not how it should be understood . . . it is this way, and then a clear picture came to my mind, and then I was sent off . . . I moved into the meditative modus, where xxx [the preacher] she just talks, and then I'm somewhere else.

This churchgoer and the above quoted 63-year-old man working as a journalist used the same words: being somewhere else.⁴⁸

I: If I have to be honest, I'm often dreaming, I'm . . . just looking out the window, I hear the words, and sometimes I close my eyes, . . . I hear all the words, but I am far away. I'm trying to recall what had been said, but I can't remember it [laughs].

M: When you close your eyes, where are you then? . . . Can you explain how it is experienced?

I: It is not of this world [pause]. It is definitely not. I've never really thought about where I was then, but uh . . . in another consciousness.

It was difficult for the churchgoers to describe this modus of being somewhere else; it was easier for them to explain what it had done to them. The following words are traces of the contemplative modus found in the interviews: being *peaceful*, being *relaxed*, and finding *inner silence* or to become *calm*. Some of the churchgoers said that they attended service to relax, to find peace, or that they appreciated the silence. A service is not silent, though, but full of words in text readings, hymns, prayers, and the sermon, so the silence referred to here is clearly a reference to the churchgoer's own state of being.

In some cases, the churchgoers' contemplative modus could be described as an interaction generated in the effort to construct meaning, a product of critical dialogue. The churchgoers' contemplative state of being was merely their experience of a peaceful mode of being present; in any case, this contemplative state of being was activated by the foreign words embedded in the liturgical service. What seemed to happen was a shift from one state of being to another, caused by an interruption of the everyday mode.

A 55-year-old male minister explicitly said that he was aware of this contemplative modus and considered it a way of receiving the sermon. He was asked about his intentions with the sermon and answered:

One of the most important things is – which is actually very difficult to define – but it is about creating a space where people can be. . . . I love when people during my sermon suddenly close their eyes, and I'm completely sure they are not listening to me anymore; but now a kind of a space is established, where they can walk by themselves.

⁴⁸ The initiating 'I' indicate the informant, and the initiating 'M' the interviewer.

He continued to explain that he thought this happened because his way of communicating allowed the churchgoers to do so. Interestingly, the churchgoers who most clearly expressed having experienced a contemplative state of being had not participated in the service held by this 55-year-old minister; they participated in other services, conducted by other ministers who were not aware of or at least not talking about the contemplative modus. Therefore, it seems that this form of contemplative interaction is not controlled or dependent upon the preachers; it occurs independently of the preacher's intentions, just like the semantic meaning production of the churchgoers. Hence, the contemplative modus seems to be more depending on the liturgical and physical room of the service in the church, than the intentions of the preacher – but still the churchgoers experiencing the contemplative modus where talking of their perception of the preacher. It seems like the churchgoers needed to trust the preacher and feel safe before giving up control and surrendering to the contemplation.

Contemplative interaction: the theoretical perspective

As the analyses of the contemplative interaction have shown, the interviewed churchgoers experienced interaction and presence in several ways in addition to the words of the preacher. At the same time, there was something about the preaching event that 'sent [them] off' to a place 'not of this world' and return with a new sense of calm and inner peace. These descriptions point to a paradoxical relationship between words and bodies in the event of listening to preaching. There seems to be a subtle interaction between words and bodies, a sense of silence through sounds of voices, and an experience of transcendent presence activated by the liturgical situatedness.

Coming from a very word-oriented church tradition like the Lutheran, the bodily reactions to the 'Word' of preaching tend to puzzle both listeners and preachers. Listeners, like the 63-year-old male journalist quoted above, admit apologetically that they often do not remember much of the sermon they have just heard. Others, like the listeners whose interaction is categorized as critical and associative, talk about their own reflections in relation to the sermon, but several also describe a bodily reaction that surpasses the cognitive level.

When we analyze this form of contemplative interaction using Bakhtinian theories of dialogue and polyphony, the interaction between words and bodies, liturgical situatedness and transcendence is not necessarily paradoxical. On the contrary, cognition and perception, epistemology and aesthetics presuppose each other, as described by Bakhtin in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity."⁴⁹ This text is part of a larger collection titled *Art and Answerability*, which emphasizes how ethical reflection and behavior are connected to one's physical context and situatedness. As summarized in an analysis of the relationship between aesthetics and theology in the authorship, "aesthetics has for Bakhtin the task of tempting ethics away from "morality" and toward an ontology of the uniquely situated body."⁵⁰

If the interaction between words of preaching and corporeal experiences of transcendent contemplation is analyzed along the lines of Bakhtinian descriptions of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, it is important to notice the role of others on the individual listeners' descriptions of contemplative modes of being. The above interview with the 46-year-old male inmate and former teacher described how he often "moved into the meditative modus, where xxx [the preacher] she just talks, and then I'm somewhere else." This utterance could suggest that the preacher's role is minimal. At other times in the interview, however,

⁴⁹ Bakhtin in: *Art and Answerability*.

⁵⁰ Graham Pechey, "Philosophy and Theology in 'Aesthetic Activity'," in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, eds. Susan M. Felch & Paul J. Contino (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 52.

this, as well as the other contemplatively oriented informants, emphasize on the importance of the relationship with the preacher.

In order to avoid either manipulating the empirical evidence so it fits with the Bakhtinian theories or vice versa we have to recognize that the informants' descriptions of contemplative experiences leading to inner peace do not have much resonance in the Bakhtinian universe which is mostly populated by polyphonic choirs in continual dialogue and grotesque bodies celebrating communal events of carnival. Yet, if we are correct in our interpretation that the informants' repeated emphasis on the relationship with the preacher suggests that it requires a certain trust in the preacher and the preaching situation in order for the churchgoer to get 'sent off' and experience the special kind of inner peace which the informants describe as the result of the contemplative interaction then Bakhtinian reflections can still be of use.

In a series of phenomenological descriptions of acts of dancing and singing Bakhtin portrays a comparative kind of trusting interaction that facilitates a passive activity that is fruitful in ways different than more subjective meaning-oriented activities. As described in his "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity":

In dancing, I become "bodied" in being to the highest degree, I come to participate in the being of others . . . the other dances in me. . . . Whence the cultic significance of dancing in the "religions of being". Dancing represents the ultimate limit of my passive self-activity, but the latter occurs everywhere in life. I am passively active whenever my action is not conditioned by the purely meaning-directed activity of my I-for-myself.⁵¹

Dance has the potential of establishing a delicate balance between activity and passivity, between taking initiatives and allowing oneself to be led, among the involved participants. This passively active mode of presence requires a different kind of activity than the individual's cognitive process of meaning making which played a significant role for the associative and critically engaged interactions described above, yet the relationship with the preaching other still plays a central role.

Homiletical implications: the role of the co-authoring preacher

If the preacher's role is merely to break in as co-authors on the churchgoers' own sermonic discourses, preachers and homileticians may wonder what kind of preaching functions in this setting. If the listeners only remember and relate to fragments of the sermon, why should preachers work on presenting whole, unified sermons?⁵²

Although the present empirical research indicates that churchgoers in practice function as the primary authors of their own sermonic discourses, they do not characterize themselves as omniscient – or omnipotent – authors. As described above, the interviewed churchgoers appreciated and requested the preacher to interrupt their chain of thoughts and add something that they would not have thought of themselves.

Furthermore, the kind of dialogue they described as taking place during preaching was not always connected with a consensus between preacher and listeners. None of the listeners described the infamous existential decision of acceptance or rejection in relation to preaching. Instead they described that when the preacher speaks with integrity and from the heart they will engage in a dialogue, whether they agree or not.

The empirical findings suggest that the role of the preacher is neither that of a model to

⁵¹ Bakhtin, "Author and Hero", 137.

⁵² Question raised by the American homiletician, Charles Campbell, in response to Marianne Gaarden's presentation of her empirical studies at Societas Homiletica's biannual meeting in Wittenberg, August 2012.

be imitated nor a neutral agent handing over an abstract, universal message or choice. Instead the preacher appears to function as an “agent of interruption”⁵³ who enters into and disturbs the inner dialogue of the listener.⁵⁴ These conceptions of the preacher as dialogue partner and agent of interruption can seem to point in different directions, yet in the empirical studies as well as in the Bakhtinian descriptions they seem to presuppose each other, as described above in relation to the interaction between outer, authoritative and inner, convincing discourses.

Based on the present empirical studies and in light of the Bakhtinian theories presented here, we suggest that preachers can benefit from exploring their roles as theological reflectors and agents of interruption⁵⁵ and from letting their discourses be penetrated by their co-authoring addressees.

The third room of preaching

Initially we asked how churchgoers listen to a sermon when participating in a service. The question is interesting with regard to the theological notion that faith comes from hearing. As mentioned, the indirect passive construction of this sentence is open to interpretation concerning masked agency. Inspired by the work of Bakhtin, we suggest that the empirically documented practice of preaching, described in three different kinds of dialogical interaction, can benefit from being seen as a polyphonic event. If we combine this understanding of preaching with the theological conviction that faith comes from hearing, then the masked agency behind faith can be described as this polyphonic event.

The polyphony of voices is not limited to the liturgical room of worship or the sermon; it is activated and nurtured in this context. Following the interviews, the polyphonic event created a third room between the preacher and the listeners, where new understandings, meanings, and perspectives were produced. This event could open the door to another place not of this world, as some of the churchgoers said, a contemplative state of being, which gave several of the listeners peace, inner calm and silence. According to these descriptions, the polyphonic room is not a room that the preacher can master or occupy, but she is called upon to engage in it, as one voice among others.

⁵³ Charles L. Campbell & Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 154–162.

⁵⁴ Since the listeners of preaching express a desire/willingness to be disturbed in their own inner dialogue one might question whether disturbance is the most appropriate word here. Yet, the fact that people describe a deliberate disposition to be disturbed has significant theological precedents. The notion of preaching as interruption can thus be interpreted in light of Dialectical Theology’s descriptions of God as the ‘Wholly Other’ who breaks in on human ways of thinking. Cf. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief II* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1989), 449 (Commentary to Romans 12, 1).

⁵⁵ Campbell & Cilliers, *Preaching Fools*, 154–162.