PREKEN TUSSEN DE VERHALEN

- een homiletische doordenking van narrativiteit -

Kees van Dusseldorp
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# INHOUD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOORD VOORAF</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INHOUD</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## HOOFDSTUK 1: INLEIDING 13

### 1.1 Motieven 13
- De preekpraktijk 13
- De preektheorie 15
- Persoonlijke motieven 16

### 1.2 Onderzoeksvraag 17

### 1.3 Eerste verkenning in narrativiteit 18
- Verhalende preken 18
- Narratieve homiletiek en theologie 19
- Narrativiteit als paradigma 20

### 1.4 Basiliën in de gereformeerde homiletiek 21
- Gereformeerde praktische theologie 21
- Formele homiletiek 24
- Theologische homiletiek 24

### 1.5 Onderzoeksweg 28

### 1.6 Vertel het Verhaal 29

Vertel het Verhaal <Genesis 18:1-15> 31

## DEEL A: EXPLOREREN 33

## HOOFDSTUK 2: HERMENEUTISCHE NARRATIVITEIT 35

### 2.1 Hermeneutische ontwikkelingen 36
- Verschuiving object 36
- Problematisering methode 37
- Subjectivering normativiteit 39
- Cultuur, paradigma en ideologie 40

### 2.2 Narratologische aspecten 42
- Literaire verhaalwetenschap 42
- Communicatief verhaalonderzoek 46
- Semiotisch verhaalmodel 47

### 2.3 Hermeneutiek en narrativiteit 52
- Relatieneus 53
- Narratieve hermeneutiek 54
- Hermeneutische narrativiteit 57

### 2.4 Onderzoeksweg 59
HOOFDSTUK 3: NARRATIEVE THEOLOGIE 61
3.1 Ontwikkeling van narratieve theologie 61
   a. Angelsaksische wortels 61
   b. Continentale wortels 63
   c. Verder ontwikkeling 64
3.2 Narratieve thema’s uit de theologie 65
   a. Bijbelwetenschap 66
   b. Kerkgeschiedenis 70
   c. Ethiek 73
   d. Pastorale zorg 75
   e. Catechese 77
   f. Systematische theologie 81
3.3 Narratieve structuren in de theologie 82
   a. Niveaus in narrativiteit 83
   b. Belangen bij narrativiteit 86
3.4 Onderzoeksweg 87

HOOFDSTUK 4: NARRATIVITEIT IN DE HOMILETIEK 89
4.1 Overzicht 89
   a. David Buttrick (1987) 89
4.2 Homiletische sleutels 103
   a. Horst Albrecht (1982) 103
   b. Eugene L. Lowry (1980) 104
   e. C. Trimp (1991) 109
   f. Charles L. Campbell (1997) 110
4.3 Narratieve structuren 111
   a. Narratieve ordening 112
   b. Hermeneutische ordening 113
   c. Homiletische ordening 115
4.4 Narratieve trends 116
   a. Theologie van de preek 116
   b. Preek en bijbel 120
   c. Preek en hoorder 123
   d. Praktijk van de preek 127
4.5 Onderzoeksweg 130

Vertel het Verhaal <Psalm 130> 133
HOOFDSTUK 5: PREKEN IN HET VERHAAL VAN GOD 137

5.1 ‘Het Grote Verhaal’ 137
   a. Het Verhaal in meervoud 137
   b. Kenmerken narratief perspectief 140
   c. Kritisch gesprek 141

5.2 Bijbel, openbaring en prediking 143
   a. Bijbel en openbaring 144
   b. Openbaring en prediking 149
   c. Prediking en Bijbel 152

5.3 Het Verhaal en gereformeerde homiletiek 156
   a. Historiciteit 156
   b. Tekstualiteit 159
   c. Heilshistorisch reliëf 162
   d. Subjectivering 165

5.4 Preken in het verhaal van God 167

HOOFDSTUK 6: PREKEN IN HET VERHAAL VAN DE MENS 171

6.1 De narratieve mens 172
   a. Achtergronden 172
   b. Narratieve aspecten van de mens 176
   c. Theologische vragen 186

6.2 Het bijbelse Verhaal van de mens 188
   a. Geschapen: het verhaal als persoonlijk antwoord 190
   b. Gevallen: de fragmentatie en manipulatie van het verhaal 191
   c. Verzoend: de waarheid of leugen van het verhaal 192
   d. Voltooid: de openheid en beweging van het verhaal 193

6.3 Narrativiteit en normativiteit 194
   a. Een narratieve wereld 195
   b. Een narratieve identiteit 201
   c. Narratieve communicatie 209

6.4 Preken in het verhaal van de mens 217

Vertel het Verhaal <Efeziërs 6:10-20> 219
DEEL C: CONCRETISEREN  

HOOFDSTUK 7: PREKEN TUSSEN DE VERHALEN  

7.1 Preken: het vertellen van Gods Verhaal  
   a. Preken als roeping  
   b. Preken als wonder  
   c. Preken als kunst  

7.2 De prediker als verteller  
   a. De prediker en de verhalen  
   b. De prediker en het vertellen  

7.3 De narratieve competentie van de prediker  
   a. Homiletische competenties  
   b. Narratieve competentie  

7.4 De narratieve prediker  
   a. Het verhaal van de prediker (perspectief: narratieve sensibiliteit)  
   b. Het verhaal van de hoorder (perspectief: narratieve attitude)  
   c. Het verhaal van de tekst (perspectief: narratieve kennis)  
   d. Het verhaal van de preek (perspectief: narratieve vaardigheid)  

Vertel het Verhaal <Lukas 2:12>  

LITERATUUR  

SAMENVATTING  

SUMMARY  

INDEX VAN AUTEURS  

CURRICULUM VITAE  

SUMMARY

*Preaching amidst the stories.* The title of this study contains the two terms which refer to the field of research. Preaching and telling both refer to the communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It not only is related to activities, but to the products of sermon and story as well. In this study both fields are actively linked to each other by means of a hermeneutical methodology. After a brief explanation of the underlying motives for the research topic, Chapter 1 leads to this research question: *What is the value of a narrative perspective for Reformed homiletics?* The aim of the study is to offer an evaluation of the narrative perspective with a view to extending the homiletic practice. A first orientation shows that a narrative approach is taken at various levels of homiletics, whereby narrativity – as a hermeneutical paradigm – is the most fundamental and all-embracing level. This is summarized in the statement that “human are narrative beings”. Before the actual research begins, a number of basic lines in Reformed homiletics are drawn by means of which this study positions itself within the whole of practical theology.

The first stage of the study is about exploration. There is no such thing as THE narrative perspective. There are just too many different methodologies, perspectives and intentions in an ever-widening stream of publications. Exploration involves collecting as well as analysing contributions, positions and developments within the field of research. In Chapter 2 this exploration is used in a versatile way within homiletics and narratology in order to conceptualize narrativity. Developments in hermeneutics result in three fundamental groups of questions focusing on: subjectivity, temporality and the reference of human knowledge. Narrative approaches provide space for these groups of questions in a postmodern way. Narratology explains why contemporary hermeneutics is referred to as ‘narrative’. By means of literary, communicative and semiotic insights into narratives a new narratological model is designed, which accommodates the various characteristics of a narrative. This narratological model not only answer the question of what constitutes a narrative, but it also helps to analyse and develop narrative approaches.

Narrative approaches occur everywhere in theology. The outline of the development of these approaches in Chapter 3 shows to what extent the rise of narrative theology is connected with the resistance to rationalism and objectivism in culture and theology. By now, narrative theology has long outgrown the phase of a reactionary theology and has been developed in all branches of theology. In this development, the relation to the Bible or God’s Narrative plays an important part. Narrative approaches keep demanding attention for the non-rational aspects of man and an open, critical and subjective perspective on reality. The different narrative applications within the various theological disciplines can ultimately be distinguished on the basis of two criteria: (1) What narrative level is under discussion (the narrative content)?; (2) What narratives are in view (the narrative shape)?
In Chapter 4 we finally arrive at our immediate field of research: narrativity and homiletics. In this chapter we start a journey of exploration, first of all through four recent hermeneutically oriented textbooks on homiletics. Next, a number of important indicators are discussed: homiletic contributions that have played a decisive role in integrating narrativity in homiletics. After that, as an interim step, the various positions are ordered in three models. Firstly, the various narratives that play a role in the homiletic situation are distinguished. Secondly, a layered model is designed for distinguishing the narrative applications according to the hermeneutically communicative levels. Finally, the narrative themes are positioned in the formal division of homiletics. This formal division then functions as the framework for an extension and deepening in current homiletic literature, as far as it has explicitly dealt with narrativity. This offers a wide panorama of narrativity in homiletics. Theological implications of a narrative perspective for Reformed homiletics have been described. This concludes the stage of exploration.

The study then continues with evaluating the theological and homiletical questions that have been formulated. In Chapter 5 the questions in relation to ‘God’s Narrative’ are discussed, together with the implications of that expression for the content of preaching. Views on the revelation of God, the historicity of the Bible and the role of preaching come under discussion. A preliminary confrontation between ‘God’s Narrative’ and classical Reformed homiletics results in the number of exciting questions with respect to historicity, textuality, redemptive history and subjectivization. Answers to these questions can only be convincing if they are formulated on the basis of a transparent concept within foundational homiletics. That is why – within a Reformed paradigm – a new description on the relation between revelation, Scripture and preaching is presented. This concept functions as a homiletic framework for evaluating the critical questions and objections raised against a narrative perspective. The conclusion is that Reformed homiletics must be reinforced and enriched from a narrative perspective. This should be considered not only legitimate and sound, but also desirable and necessary. If this does not take place, the result will be a hermeneutical, communicative and theological deficiency in homiletics. In the proclamation of the gospel, God’s Narrative about man and the world continues.

Chapter 6 discusses the second fundamental group of questions revolving around the narrative of man. The point of entry here is the ‘narrativity thesis’ which states that human consciousness is structured narratively: that human beings live in a world full of narratives and that they are continually busy with the narratives of their own lives. First of all, the narrative identity of man is described and elaborated by means of the narratological model that was already developed. This description produces a great deal of homiletic questions that can be summarized in the following three: (1) how narrative is the world in which we live; (2) how narrative is our identity?; (3) how narrative is our inter-human communication? A convincing discussion requires a normative concept in which the relations between God, man and world are described in a new way. The biblical Narrative of man offers a fruitful concept for a narrative approach of man within practical theology. On the basis of this normative concept, the narrativity thesis can be taken seriously, accepted and developed. With a critical, theological and homiletic attitude, narrativity and normativity are connected and the
concepts of narrative world, narrative identity and narrative communication are developed further. The conclusion that can be drawn is that the narrative perspective on man brings important aspects into view which Reformed homiletics cannot and should not ignore. If it does, this will result in an anthropological, normative and subjective deficiency in homiletics. The hearer – in his narrativity – needs God’s Narrative that is told in preaching.

After the stages of exploration and evaluation, the way has been prepared for the third stage of this study, that of concretizing. In Chapter 7 the research results will be applied in the encounter with the preacher as the one who tells God’s Narrative in a world full of narratives and narrators. Before this approach is taken, a homiletic picture is drawn of preaching as a calling, a miracle and an art. The preacher has to deal with narrativity on many levels. This means he should have a narrative competence. After a critical evaluation of the way in which competence has been theorized within homiletics, a desired narrative competence is formulated: the preacher should be able to provide space for the Narrative of God’s grace in Jesus Christ by constructing and delivering his sermon in such a way that the narratives of the hearer, of the text and of himself are done justice and are connected. This competence provides the homiletic practice with a good sense of direction. The study ends with a variety of practical applications and recommendations, whereby the preacher’s narrative sensibility, attitude, knowledge and ability are connected to the way he deals with the narratives of himself, the hearer, the text and the sermon. Scattered throughout the book, there are four meditations that were written from a narrative and Reformed perspective. They are not meant as examples of how things should be done, but as illustrations of how things could be done. In addition to the abstract theoretical research, they offer an opportunity to show concretely how God’s Narrative continues in the narrative of the sermon, whereby it is hoped that readers and hearers advance in their own narratives with God.
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