

Context is crucial because **preachers are homiletical theologians**. Preaching is ultimately a theological activity and for that reason calls forth contextual depth at every level of the interpretive process. The Greek verb behind the word for “homiletics” (*homileō*) means to converse. To preach is to carry on a conversation between ancient texts and contemporary hearers—both steeped in context. Preachers are residential theologians who in the gospel carry on an unfinished conversation between the context-bounded realities that are texts and hearers.

With an *ancient text*, this becomes obvious. Biblical texts, as Bultmann noted, are the product of ancient worldviews that often sound foreign to contemporary ears. Yet even when texts seem “familiar,” this can be deceiving. The language of the New Testament is *koine* Greek. Looking at ancient manuscripts, one would often discover that their Greek letters are crammed together from margin to margin, without benefit of punctuation or spaces. Imagine an uncial manuscript (which uses only capital letters) reading in English something like this:

GODISNOWHERE

Greek manuscripts of this uncial type require contextual interpretation at the very beginning. Is the uncial phrase to be interpreted as “God-is-now-here” or “God-is-nowhere”? Context—whether grammatical, literary, social, cultural, or ideological—is present from the start.

Gadamer has taught that we human beings are ourselves products of an “effective history” of interpretation, an *interpretive tradition*. Contemporary interpreters are being shaped by the ways in which a text has been understood through time, languages, and in interpretive communities. For preaching, the *preunderstandings* of the interpretive tradition are also part of the theological conversation. If KJV Jesus says “suffer the little children,” we preachers need to be ready to identify any preunderstandings so that the older English sense of suffering as “*allow...*” or “*let the children come unto me*” comes through clearly in the

conversation. The interpretive tradition thus aids and grounds the theological conversation that is preaching.

Finally, if the theological conversation is to be lively and not just a museum piece, it must make a contextual accounting of the *contemporary discussion*. Contemporary hearers in the pews bring their own understandings to the mix: our worldviews, ideologies, identities, and interests. This third part is the toughest contextual task of all. Why? Context is a little bit like water to a fish. How might a fish describe that clear reality that it both swims through and receives life from? Especially when preachers and hearers possess relative power, there is a tendency for some contextual realities to be rendered invisible. And yet, because we preachers are **homiletical theologians**, the gospel must be named, especially when contextual elements are hard to see. A good place to start is to read a troublesome Scripture text aloud in the congregation and then say, “The Word of the Lord.” Is the intonation of the congregation “Thanks be to God!” or is it sometimes “Thanks be to God?” Either way, it will mean that the context of the contemporary discussion has intruded and a homiletical-theological conversation has truly begun.

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