

Overestimated and Underestimated –
A Case Study of the Practice of Preaching for Children with an Emphasis on
Children's Role as Listeners

In recent decades, the field of Homiletics has seen an empirical turn, which has resulted in more listener-response research. However, the listeners studied have primarily been adults. Research on children and preaching from a homiletical point of view is consequently limited, both internationally and within Norway. With the present thesis, I address this lacuna in homiletical research.

This is a compilation thesis, consisting of an extended introduction and three articles. The research for this study has been conducted as part of the larger research project, “Preaching for Young and Old” (Forkynnelse for små og store), directed by my thesis supervisor, Tone Stangeland Kaufman. I have employed material from six congregations and four different Christian education events in the Church of Norway. The material comprises group interviews with children, semi-structured interviews with preachers, participant observations at Christian education events, video-recorded worship services, and transcribed preaching events.

The main research question is explorative, asking: *How can the practice of preaching for children be described and understood?* I situate the study within a practice-theoretical paradigm, inspired by Theodore Schatzki's understanding of practice theory and Bakhtinian dialogical theory. My foundational understanding of preaching builds on the theories mentioned above, which understands preaching as a two-sided action and listeners as co-authors of preaching events.

Although previous research has argued that preaching can be understood as a practice, these contributions have solely concentrated on the preacher's practice. In order to better understand the practice of preaching for children, I, make the case that it is necessary to study all the actors in the practice, including exploring how listeners, materiality, and time and space are constitutive for the practice. I find that both a diverse range of homiletical literature and the preachers interviewed assume that congregants know which role and task they have during preaching events, namely to listen and interpret, and subsequently find relevance for their own lives from the preaching events. However, this thesis demonstrates that this is not always the case. Hence, I suggest that homileticians should ask not only what listeners hear in preaching events but also ask what listeners do with preaching events.

Following the broader understanding of preaching for children as a practice, the three articles explore different parts of this practice. The first article, “Preaching at the Thresholds,” concentrates on *the preaching event* and discusses how drama, objects, and Biblical texts are used in preaching events. The article shows that employing drama and objects do not necessarily make preaching events more dialogical. I also point out the tendency to separate form and content in preaching for children, an argument that is further elaborated in the third article.

In the second article, “I Wish We Could Fast Forward It,” I explore *the listener's role* in the practice of preaching for children. I demonstrate that children and preachers understand preaching in

different ways. Although the majority of the children struggle to interpret preaching events as relevant for their own lives and faith, I show that some of them employ material objects and the atmosphere of being in church as means of reflection.

In the third article, “Keeping it Age-Appropriate,” the *preachers* are in the foreground. Here I investigate which timespaces (the dimension of practices) are produced in the preachers’ practice and how they contribute to configuring the practice. Furthermore, I explore the preachers’ normative assumptions and show that these result in the preachers defining preaching for children as different than preaching for adults. I also point to how the timespace of age-appropriateness is dominant in almost every aspect within the preachers’ preaching practice.

The main finding across the articles is that within the practice of preaching for children, children are simultaneously overestimated and underestimated. Children are conceptualized as different from adults, leading the preachers to the logical conclusion that children also need different forms of preaching than adults. As a consequence, the preachers often separate form and content when they preach for children, emphasizing age-appropriate, interactive, and short and simple forms.

On the one hand, children are overestimated in that the preachers presuppose that the children know what preaching is and what they should do with preaching. The children are also overestimated in the preachers’ presumption that children understand that the rules and ends of preaching differ depending on time and place. On the other hand, children are underestimated in that preachers presume they can gain access to children’s lifeworld and experience according to the children’s age. Moreover, the children are underestimated in the assumption that they will only listen to preaching if the preaching events consider their age group, directly involve them and are simple, short, and “fun”. Contrary to this assumption, I show that the children interviewed are more than capable and willing to discuss existential and complex questions and also state that this is an activity they engage more frequently than usually in when being in church.

This thesis demonstrates that the field of Homiletics provides vital contributions to the area of preaching for children, especially on the view and role of listeners and what preachers can assume to know about their audience. The thesis argues that the practice of preaching for children needs to hold together form and content and begin treating children more as individuals and less according to their age group. Furthermore, the thesis demonstrates that materiality, time, and space influence preaching practices in no small degree. I, therefore, argue that Homiletics needs an understanding of preaching that considers communication as a practice.

In conclusion, in understanding preaching as a practice, and thus asking what listeners do with preaching, preachers, listeners, actions, materiality, and time and space are taken more seriously as constitutive for producing preaching events, resulting in a better and deeper understandings of preaching for children.