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GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH IN SERMON ANALYSIS OF SERMONS ON POVERTY AND DIRECTED AT THE POOR AS LISTENERS[1]

ABSTRACT

The grounded theory approach is implemented in analysing sermons on poverty and directed at the poor as listeners. This is an abductive approach in the paradigm of social constructionism as developed by Cathy Charmaz in Sociology. I am applying this method of empirical analysis to sermons, in this case sermons on poverty with Matthew 25:31-46 as sermon text. In this article, I am going to discuss the place of grounded theory in qualitative research and the application of Charmaz's approach to it in homiletics. The process of sermon analysis in its different phases will be discussed as well as the interaction of this bottom-up theory with existing homiletic theories in relation to the research topic. The goal is to update our knowledge contextually in the interaction between praxis and theory with a view to preaching in our context of poverty.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is a privilege for me to contribute in this way in honour of Johan Janse van Rensburg on his retirement as professor in Practical Theology. During the years, we shared certain views on homiletics and the use of empirical research in our discipline. In the field of homiletics, he has made a great contribution (cf. Janse van Rensburg 1991; 2001; 2002; 2003; 2007a; 2007b; 2008; 2009).

My research on preaching and poverty started in 2000 with a book on the poverty situation in South Africa, especially in the black community (Pieterse [2001] 2004). Therefore, I studied the effects of legislation on affirmative action on white people and the practice of it in the workplace, especially people's experiences of God when they lose their jobs or cannot find jobs because of the colour of their skin – with the question of how we should preach to these people in this situation that leads to poverty (Pieterse 2009a). Then a study followed in which the question was addressed whether we should preach God's providence in this context of unemployment (one of the results in the previous research that respondents indicated when they could get a private job in family networks). This research led me to the idea that, in our context, preaching from the kingdom parables of Jesus would be the best way to go about it (Pieterse 2009b). Since 2009, I have embarked on a six-year research project with the leading title: Content analysis of sermons on the kingdom parables of Jesus preached on poverty and to the poor with the objective to develop a grounded theory for preaching in different contexts of poverty. In an international literature search, a research gap for this specific kind of research has been found (Pieterse 2009c).

In this article, I want to explain the process of grounded theory research in *homiletics* according to Glaser's (1978) and Charmaz's (2006) approaches to grounded theory. This research is empirical research in homiletics. Empirical research in homiletics studies the practice of preaching. It is theological research because we work with theological theories and approach preaching as a religious practice from a theological perspective in our research. Preaching is a verbal discourse in a ritual context of the gathered faith community; therefore, preaching is also a social act that can be studied empirically (Immink & Verweij 2007:141-142). Grounded theory research of sermons has the goal to develop theories for practice from a bottom-up approach, from the concepts emerging from the practice of preachers themselves – an abductive approach (Charmaz 2006:186). I am following the research approach of Gerrit Immink's homiletical research group consisting of Boonstra, Pleizier and Verweij in Utrecht, the Netherlands (Immink, Boonstra, Pleizier & Verweij 2009).

I shall first discuss the theoretical framework for practical theological research, then the choice for a grounded theory approach, followed by an

explanation of the process of grounded theory research in stages of the sermon analysis of sermons on Matthew 25:31-46.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL AND HOMILETIC RESEARCH

The core of the practice we study in practical theology is *faith* in its living relationship and communication between God and faithful human beings, and human beings between each other: "The praxis of faith is formed by the interaction between God and human beings, as well as among humans" (Immink 2005:1; cf. Immink 2005:11-12, 1994:16; Pieterse 1984:7). God takes the initiative in this relationship, and the presence of the speaking God and the responding human can be experienced in the practice of this relationship. This relationship and the communication of it find its observable practice of *faith as it is lived,* which also includes the presentation by the preacher and the active listening of the congregation in the liturgy (Immink 2005:43-69; Pieterse 2009a:253-254). The field of study in practical theology includes faith as it is lived in our everyday practice, our pastoral practice and in the worship service.

This relationship and communication between God and humans is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit (De Wet 2009; cf. Heitink 1993:187-188; Pieterse 1993:134-142). How can the reality of God and the reality of humankind be joined in connectedness? Only by means of the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we work with a pneumatological point of departure in this theoretical framework for the study of practical theology. Therefore, our point of departure in scientific research is unique in the spectrum of the social sciences (De Wet 2009:241). Immink speaks of the uniqueness of the praxis of faith in the face of the existential character of the human act of faith and the *praesentia Dei*, the presence of God in this human act of faith (Immink 2005:3). All this is possible because human beings are spiritual beings with the ability to communicate – speak, listen and respond in relationships. God is a speaking God who communicates with us in personal relationships through his Word and his Spirit. In this approach, we have to work with theology, the understanding of God in his revelation in Scripture and his activity in our lives, as well as with anthropology, the understanding of human beings and their actions that require empirical research. Practical theology is a theological and an empirical science.

The same applies to research in homiletics. The sermon is a public address. It is a speech act. In this speech, however, the preacher's aim is to speak about God, to address the congregation with the Word of God. Preacher and listener are closely related in the interaction in a dialogical

way (cf. Immink 2005:273-277; Pieterse 2001a). In the preaching event are observable linguistic and social actions that can be analysed empirically, but there is also a spiritual dimension, communication and communion with God, the Word of God as an event that touches the hearts and lives of people in a transformational way. This dimension must be studied theologically. My homiletic approach functions in this theoretic framework for the grounded theory analysis of sermons. This is a hermeneutic and communicative approach informed by Gadamer, Ricoeur and Habermas (cf. *inter alia* Pieterse 2001a). The basic tenet is that, in the understanding of a Biblical text for preaching, the context of the listeners to the sermon and the context of the text are taken seriously hermeneutically. In the dialogical grapple with the text and the context of the congregation, the preacher should first be touched by the message of the text as well as the situation and need of the listeners, moved to a new perspective, and then he/she can be a witness of the experience with the text in the light of the huge challenges of our contemporary situation.

We study Christian faith as it is lived in the practice of communication and communion with God and fellow humans, and how faith is formed, celebrated and nurtured. Practical theology is an action science.

3. A CHOICE FOR A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

Grounded theory research is applied in homiletics in a few important studies (cf. Pieterse 1995, 2001b; Moehn 1996). Moehn used the method only in the first stage of his research. Theo Pleizier, who is part of Immink's research group, will soon publish his dissertation in homiletics reflecting the latest developments in grounded theory. Grounded theory research in the social sciences was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). They turned away from verification by means of quantitative research of current, already developed theories. Their methodology aimed at the generation of new theories through the formulation of new concepts *out of raw material* in qualitative research. They made use of theoretic sampling, coding of the texts of interviews, documents, etc., to find concepts with their properties, and by means of constant comparison of codes and concepts, they discovered relations between the concepts that led to hypotheses. In a follow-up of this book, Glaser (1978) describes an important characteristic of grounded theory, namely the sensitivity and ability of researchers to discover abstract categories in studying raw material. New developments and refining of the methodology have taken place since then (cf. Charmaz 2006). At the moment, different disciplines in the social sciences are using varieties of grounded theory methodology in their research programmes.

In the history of refining the methodology, Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue for a methodology that is not fully fledged grounded theory in the sense that current developed theories have too much influence on the process of bottom-up research. The technical words are 'forcing' as opposed to 'fitting', which means the forcing of foreign concepts on the data instead of developing concepts that fit the data. Forcing by means of concepts of current theories is a hindrance for the emergence of concepts from the data (Glaser & Strauss 1992). Furthermore, there is no clear distinction between description and conceptualisation. In the past decade, a huge discussion on approaches in grounded theory raged among scholars (cf. Bryant & Charmaz 2007). The result was that grounded theory has developed in divergent directions. Glaser stays with the earlier understanding of the method and therefore defines it as a method of discovery. He treats categories as emergent from the data and that they must stay close to the data in order for the emerging concepts to fit the data. Strauss and Corbin moved the method in the direction of verification (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Glazer is convinced that Strauss and Corbin's procedures force data and analysis into preconceived categories and therefore move away from the basic tenets of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006:8). Many scholars have steered grounded theory away from the positivistic notions in this more positivistic version of Strauss and Corbin (Charmaz 2006:9). The scene is clearer at the moment, and one can make a sensible choice for working with grounded theory. This researcher follows the approach of Glaser and Kathy Charmaz. Charmaz works in a postmodern understanding of academic research based on the tradition of pragmatic philosophy of the Chicago school of sociology. Pragmatism views reality as open to multiple interpretations. It assumes that people are active and creative and therefore meanings emerge through practical actions to solve problems, and through actions people come to know the world. Facts and values are linked and not separate. Hypotheses are always provisional (Charmaz 2006:188). Pragmatism has informed symbolic interactionism that assumes that society, reality and our own views are constructed through interaction with others in which language and communication are basic. There are dynamic relationships between meanings and actions, and people create and mediate meanings through active processes (Charmaz 2006:189). Therefore, Charmaz positions grounded theory in a constructionist approach. The analyst and the authors of texts and narratives are co-constructing the categories and the concepts that emerge from the specific substantive area, that is the research area, in grounded theory research (Charmaz 2006:7).

> We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research

> practices … any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretive* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it (Charmaz 2006:10).

A number of scholars subscribe to Charmaz's contention that we can use basic grounded theory guidelines with twenty-first-century methodological assumptions and approaches. In his recent book on practical theological study, Richard Osmer also includes grounded theory methodology in practical theological research: "This strategy seeks to develop a theory that is closely related to the context of the phenomenon being studied" (Osmer 2008:52). Furthermore, in this paradigm of thinking, an ethical approach is very important. What do ethics mean for good practice so that people may experience the well-being of God's presence in their situation (Osmer 2008:4)?

Grounded theory research is valuable in homiletics when one does research in a substantive area (research area with a well-described problem in a specific context) of which we have no theoretical knowledge. The project of discussion in this article has to do with preaching on poverty and to the poor as listeners with a specific parable of Jesus as sermon text (Matthew 25:31-46). It is a substantive area of which we have no theoretical knowledge of what really goes on in the practice of this preaching. My first attempt at grounded theory research was with sermons of Desmond Tutu using Fred Wester's interpretation of them. It was not very sophisticated (cf. Pieterse 1995). We only came up with themes in the sermons and with the structure of argumentation of each sermon. Now, by following the approach of Charmaz, there is a better scientific understanding of the method and its application in homiletics.

4. ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS TOWARDS PEOPLE IN NEED: RESEARCH PROJECT ON PREACHERS' INTERPRETATIONS OF MATTHEW 25:31-46

The foundational work for this research project has already been done and published (see the introduction). The grounded theory methodology has been selected for this project (see previous section). I have already started with the first round of collecting sermons for analysis. An important question now is whether one should analyse themes in the data as in my 1995 research (cf. Pieterse 1995) or choose another approach. Charmaz argues for the emphasis on examining processes and thereby making the study of *action* central (Charmaz 2006:9). In Verweij's research on sermons preached during Lent, he analyses the actions of the preacher in the sermon: What is the preacher *doing* in the sermon? The preacher as the agent of the sermon and the way the preacher is dealing with the subject or theme of the sermon come

into focus (Immink & Verweij 2007:153). Therefore, his codes are formulated as "Minister states… Minister asserts… Minister gives… Minister claims… Minister criticizes…" (Immink & Verweij 2007:150). When you analyse preached sermons for their *contents,* they should be treated in this way. Therefore, the performance of the sermon, or the reception by the listeners, or the person of the preacher, or the rhetoric of the sermon is not central when one asks questions about the contents of the sermon in this way. My research also asks questions about the content of the sermon *on* poverty and *what* is said to the poor as listeners.

The collecting of data was done by means of theoretical sampling (cf. Immink & Verweij 2007:148) A theoretical sample of preachers was drawn from the Uniting Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed Church to collect sermons on Matthew 25:31-46. In theoretical sampling, the researcher seeks people, events or information that is relevant to the research problem and has the potential to illuminate the specific substantive area and the categories emerging from the data (cf. Charmaz 2006:189). Samples have to be relevant in relation to the research question and process of the research. Sermons from different provinces and contexts form part of the theoretical sampling logic in my project. I requested preachers in the sample to provide written sermons on the text in Matthew. Usually, a researcher will take the context of the liturgy, the interpretation of the listeners of the sermon and the intent of the preacher with his/her sermon into consideration when doing sermon analysis. Using only the written sermon provided by the preacher can place a limitation on the research results. Nevertheless, content analysis of written texts of sermons has benefits. What the preacher really says, the theology and exegesis, the context of the listeners and how she/he deals with it can be found in the written text. Furthermore, the absence of the researcher in the worship service is beneficial in the sense that his/her presence has no influence on the communication in the sermon.

The grounded theory process in this research will proceed according to Charmaz's model (Charmaz 2006:11):

1. Sensitising concepts and general disciplinary perspectives leading to the research problem and opening research questions.
2. Data collection and initial coding (open coding).
3. Initial memos raising codes to tentative categories.
4. More data collection and focused coding (selective codes). By means of constant comparison of significant segments and codes, core categories can be found. Advanced memos starting to refine conceptual categories.

5. Theoretical sampling seeking specific new data in order to seek for theoretical codes. Theoretical memo writing and further refining of concepts. Adapting certain categories as theoretical concepts.
6. Diagramming concepts in their relations and constructing a grounded theory.
7. Critical interaction between the new grounded theory and related theories in homiletics and on Matthew 25:31-46.

4.1 Theological sensitising concepts and the research problem

The function and usefulness of sensitising concepts is to help the analyst to open up the data and get started in the substantive area under investigation. It opens up the data in the phase of open coding of the data. The sensitising concepts come from the preliminary theoretical framework that has been constructed in view of the research project (see 2 above and Pieterse 2009a; 2009b; 2009c). The concepts that I shall mention are not involved in the analysis anymore, because the first stages of the analysis are done in an inductive way. Later on, when the emerging codes are reflected in an abstract way, the concepts can play a role. A literature search has resulted in three approaches to addressing poverty in the South African context.

1. South African liberation theology. This view is that once the country is liberated from apartheid and democracy is broadened to include all South Africans, the new black government will provide for the poor (cf. for instance Boesak 1977:41,126-131; Scott 1994). The main concept is *social grants*.

   This dream has not been realised in full since the ANC came to power.

   The dream of a caring and compassionate society that many fought for during the liberation struggle has now evaporated. Giving money away to the BEE tycoons, while shouting 'entitlement' if the poor demand a basic income grant, is the height of hypocrisy and is at the heart of the collapse of moral values (Gumede 2009:25-26).

2. Justice for all in society practised by the government (cf. Boesak 1977; Forrester 2007; Resner 2003; Wafawanaka 2000; Noordegraaf 2000). The main concept is *social justice*.
3. The sharing and caring for the poor and those in need by Christian faith communities living by the Kingdom values of Jesus' message in the context of South Africa (cf. Van Aarde 1996; Pieterse 2009b; Hughes 2008). The main concept is *Christian care*.

It is clear that poverty is a great problem in South Africa and that it is the cause of other societal problems such as illness, lack of education and crime (cf. Pieterse 2001; 2004). Reflection on the approaches to deal with poverty with their sensitising concepts in theological terms led me to the following leading *research question*: How do preachers deal with sermons on poverty and with the poor as listeners with Matthew 25:31-46 as sermon text?

4.2 Open or initial coding

In relation to the research question, all coding is done from the perspective of the preacher. During the first round of sermon collection, open coding can begin. I started the analysis by dividing a sermon into more or less natural segments or incidents. Open coding means that the researcher labels the content of the segment in a direct and open way. It involves the opening of the data in a segment or fragment of a sermon by attributing codes that emerge from the specific section. Through coding, the researcher defines what is happening in the data and begins to grapple with what it means. Labelling is done by means of the words of the preacher that reflect action (Charmaz 2006: 48). During the open or initial coding, one remains open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities one can discern in the data. This phase of open coding helps one to move towards a later stage of defining conceptual categories. The first stage of coding the data also helps one to see areas that lack more data. The activity of open coding discovers gaps or holes of needed data that prompt one to collect more data (sermons in this case) to fill up the gaps from new data. These gaps in the data will be a hindrance in developing a rich theory from the data. Therefore, open coding and sermon collection happen simultaneously (Charmaz 2006: 48).

Open coding of segments in the sermon moves one toward fulfilling two criteria for developing a grounded theory from the data analysis, namely 'fit' and 'relevance'.

> Your study fits the empirical world when you have constructed codes and developed them into categories that crystallize participants' experience. It has relevance when you offer an incisive analytic framework that interprets what is happening and makes relationships between implicit processes and structures visible (Charmaz 2006: 54).

The coding of two segments of a sermon preached in the Uniting Reformed Church in Mpumalanga on 11 October 2009 is an example of open coding:

Segment B

As Christians we have a responsibility to look after the most insignificant people in the family of Jesus … With our good deeds to help people in need we can never earn God's grace … Christ has given everything of himself to us … Jesus was hungry, thirsty and without clothes and you gave him what he needed. These are deeds out of gratefulness without the one hand knowing what the other hand is doing … The beauty of these good deeds (in the text) is that these people did it unknowingly, because they were spontaneous deeds, done with gladness and gratefulness, in humbleness – deeds that they immediately forgot.

1. The preacher says that we have a responsibility to care for people in need.
2. The preacher states we cannot earn anything from God with charity.
3. The preacher reminds listeners that Christ gave himself to us.
4. The preacher encourages listeners to care out of gratefulness.
5. The preacher notes that those who care in such a way do not even know that they have cared for Jesus.

Segment C

Years ago in Eersterust a group of Dutch women joined sisters from the congregation to clean the houses of weakened elderly people. They washed them, they washed their clothes and linen, they brought food to the homes, and after that they read from the Bible and prayed for them … Take these Dutch women's care as an example of deeds of humble service to reach out to the sick, the lonely and elderly people in our community, because in practicing Christian care with love we have to look further as the walls of the church and the people in the congregation … Start a small vegetable garden in your yard to feed yourself and share the crop with others. That may inspire more people to become interested in an own vegetable garden.

1. The preacher suggests that old and sick people should be helped with washing, cleaning and food.
2. The preacher advises that small vegetable gardens could be cultivated.

4.3 The initial identifying of categories

The open coding process continues with every new sermon that is analysed. A vast number of codes are generated and "these codes can be sorted out

in code families, which eventually become categories" (Immink & Verweij 2007:149). The next phase in the analysis, therefore, is the searching for categories among the many open codes. This analytical step implies the selection of certain codes that have overriding significance (Charmaz 2006:186). By means of constant comparison of segments and codes, an abstraction process starts where several codes are joined in an analytical category that can become an analytical concept. With constant comparison of codes, segments and categories, the category could be thickened or abandoned. The researcher must always be aware of and sure about the link between the emerging category and the empirical data of the sermons. In the process of constant comparison in identifying categories among the codes, one has to focus on core categories that will emerge (Immink & Verweij 2007:149). The core categories may develop into core concepts in the building up of the grounded theory.

In the example above of open coding of a sermon in my research project, code 4 of segment B reflects the preacher's encouragement to care for people in need as a result of our gratefulness for what Jesus Christ has done for us. All the preachers in the first round of sermon collection preach sermons on Matthew 25:31-46. Therefore, one can suspect that the idea of "good deeds and caring for people in need because of our gratefulness, thankfulness" can emerge from other sermons as well. With constant comparison of codes and segments, the researcher should be watchful for this initial category. The same applies to code 1 in segment B: the idea that we (as Christians) have a responsibility to care for people in need. Code 2 of Segment C, "growing your own vegetable garden", can also function as an initial category. In grounded theory research, one should be aware of the fact that theologians *cannot* recall the concept "gratefulness toward God for salvation in Christ" from systematic theology with its properties as developed in the past. We are working with faith as it is lived in practice in practical theology, and we are precisely trying to find fresh light on concepts as they emerge from sermons.

An important activity in the research at this stage is to start writing memos. One has to keep notes while coding and compare codes from different sermons. Possible categories such as "care because of thankfulness", "responsibility to care for those in need" and "growing your own vegetable garden" should now be noted in the first initial memo with a view to compare with later memos.

> When grounded theorists write memos, they stop and analyze their ideas about their codes and emerging categories in whatever way it occurs to them … Memo-writing is a crucial method in grounded theory because it prompts researchers to analyze their data and to develop

> their codes into categories early in the research process (Charmaz 2006:188).

4.4 Selective codes (focus coding)

Selective or focussed coding is the second major phase in coding (Charmaz, 2006:57). Up to now, open coding and finding categories by means of constant comparison of codes and segments or incidents is descriptive and therefore research in an inductive way. In this phase, the researcher starts with deductive research actions. By means of theoretical sampling, new sermons must be collected in which the researcher will now look for selective codes – codes that enrich the emerging categories with more characteristics or properties. More categories may emerge, too. The codes of the analysis in this phase are more directed, selective and conceptualised than the former codes. Selective coding means using the most significant and frequent earlier codes (now initial categories) to sift through large amounts of data and thicken the categories with a cluster of characteristics around the categories. Now you can categorise your data incisively and completely. Axial coding comes into play now.

> Researchers then reassemble their categories through a process known as axial coding in which they describe the phenomenon being studied in terms of central categories (Osmer 2008:52).

> Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data … to give coherence to the emerging analysis (Charmaz 2006:60).

Core categories become selective codes by means of the attachment of properties. At this stage, advanced memos refine the conceptual or core categories.

4.5 Theoretical codes

The researcher should be theoretically sensitive during the whole process of analysis, but especially during this third cycle of coding when theoretical memos are written with a further refining of concepts.

> Theorizing means stopping, pondering, and rethinking anew … The acts involved in theorizing foster *seeing* possibilities, *establishing* connections, and *asking* questions. Grounded theory methods give you

> theoretical openings that avoid importing or imposing packaged images and automatic answers (Charmaz 2006:135).

Theoretical codes are the most abstract codes that come to the fore by means of a creative handling of constant comparison and sorting of memos, and the reviewing of core categories. If any new data reveal no new properties of selective codes or further theoretical insights, one can adopt certain core categories as theoretical concepts.

During this creative and theoretically sensitive phase, reading of relevant literature can shed new light on the issue, without trying to force these ideas on the data.

4.6 Constructing a theory

The concepts in a formal theory are abstract and general and the theory specifies the links between these concepts. The relations between the concepts should now be indicated. The conditions that can influence the phenomenon should be captured, and when the phenomenon is influenced by certain conditions, strategies should also be shown (Osmer 2008:52).

In developing the grounded theory, the concepts become more and more integrated. The theoretical relations between concepts are expressed in hypotheses.

4.7 Critical interaction with existing homiletic theories

Grounded theories that emerge from practice as faith that is lived have the potential to shed new, fresh light on existing theories. In this case, the grounded theory will be on a specific preaching activity, namely on poverty and on the poor as listeners with kingdom parables of Jesus in Matthew as the sermon text.

The interaction with existing homiletic theories will be in the fashion of the *crux* of practical theological critical interaction between praxis and theory. In this interaction, leading principles will be theological and ethical interpretation (cf. Osmer 2008:139-161). Hopefully, this will take us a step further in our ministry of the Word of God in the South African context of poverty.

5. CONCLUSION

We do not know what preachers preach all over South Africa to people in need every Sunday, especially because of poverty. Grounded theory

research is a methodological tool that may help us in this regard. A grounded theory emerging from the practice of preaching has the potential to make a contribution to our understanding of homiletics in this country.

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