



EDITORIAL

WANTED: CATFISH FOR OUR THINK TANK

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Perhaps you have heard, if not retold, some version of the following story from Chuck Swindoll's devotional *Come Before Winter* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985):

In the northeastern United States, codfish are not only delectable, they are a big commercial business. There's a market for eastern cod all over, especially in sections farthest removed from the northeast coastline. But the public demand posed a problem to the shippers. At first they froze the cod, then shipped them elsewhere, but the freeze took away much of the flavor. So they experimented with shipping them alive, in tanks of seawater, but that proved even worse. Not only was it more expensive, the cod still lost its flavor, and in addition, became soft and mushy. The texture was seriously affected.

Finally, some creative soul solved the problem in a most innovative manner. The codfish were placed in the tank of water along with their natural enemy—the catfish. From the time the cod left the East Coast until it arrived in

its westernmost destination, those ornery catfish chased the cod all over the tank! And you guessed it, when the cod arrived at the market, they were as fresh as when they were first caught. There was no loss of flavor nor was the texture affected. If anything, it was better than before.¹

The moral of the story is obvious, if not its historical accuracy, helpfully reminding us that adversity, tension, resistance—call it what you will—is actually good for us. It keeps us from becoming soft, mushy, and bland. For this reason, writes Paul, “[W]e rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character” (Rom. 5:3-4a). According to James, trials produce steadfastness that makes us “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4). To put it bluntly, resistance builds resilience, and resilience fosters excellence.

This same principle carries over into numerous areas of life. Note the domain of athletics built on the premise of resistance, resilience, and excellence. Biologists, for example, claim that young children’s immune systems are strengthened by exposure to everyday germs, by which their systems learn, adapt, and come to regulate themselves. The right amount of exposure before age two lessens inflammation in their bodies as children grow into adulthood, thus lowering their risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, and Alzheimer’s later in life (<https://www.webmd.com/parenting/features/kids-and-dirt-germs>). Too much handwashing and hand sanitizer in a child’s early life, it seems, lowers the child’s resistance, thereby creating subsequent health risks.

Sterility has its place. Medical labs, for instance, must be constantly scoured to prevent cross contamination between samples and specimens. There only women are allowed to type an embryo’s sex; otherwise, a male technician’s own DNA might skew the test’s results. Ultra-cleanliness and hyper vigilance are a must in medical labs.

In other places, sterility and strict restrictions are not only unhelpful but detrimental. The 2020 Netflix documentary *The*

Social Dilemma (directed by Jeff Orlowski, Exposure Labs) examines how social media nurtures addiction, manipulates users in various ways, modifies human behaviors, and erodes mental health. One of the film's contributors, Justin Rosenstein worked as a product manager at Google and program engineer at Facebook before co-founding the software company Aswana. In a segment of the documentary exposing how search engines' algorithms determine what types of information to display to users based on their past search histories, clicks, likes and dislikes, etcetera, and how those search results foster polarization in our society, Rosenstein observes, "You look over at the other side, and you start to think, 'How can those people be so stupid? Look at all of this information that I'm constantly seeing. How are they not seeing that same information?' And the answer is, 'They're not seeing that same information.'" Moments later, Senator Marco Rubio addresses the political aspect and social fallout of this polarization: "We are a nation of people... that no longer speak to each other. We are a nation of people who have stopped being friends with people because of who they voted for in the last election. We are a nation of people who have isolated ourselves to only watch channels that tell us that we're right."

What is needed are holy healthy places for thinking, interaction, and engagement without intellectual prejudice or divisiveness. We need think tanks more than we need labs.

Our Evangelical Homiletics Society is not so much a lab as it is a think tank. A think tank consists of a body of experts who share ideas and advice to advance a chosen field of research and application. Unlike medical labs, think tanks are messy places. Not all ideas gain traction there. Advice can come off as criticism. Sacred cows get slaughtered. Presuppositions are called into question. Novelty is neither embraced for novelty's sake nor rejected on the same grounds. Catfish swim freely in healthy think tanks. By their presence, resistance, and "convince me" attitudes, they keep their colleagues' minds from growing soft and mushy.

Sadly, and to their detriment, academic societies and their memberships can easily morph into scholastic aquariums—permitting no room for critique, disagreement, or new ideas. The same could be said of colleges, universities, and seminaries or even denominations. They have their own ways of viewing the world and feel comfortable, thank you very much, in their placid waters. When they foresee they run the risk of encountering a catfish outside their own aquarium, they stay home with their colleagues to continue swimming in their preferred school of thought.

The Evangelical Homiletics Society was founded not to be an intellectual carapace, shielding ourselves and our homiletic from critique or thoughtful interaction. Instead, the society was established to bring together the best evangelical minds to engage the issues of our day that intersect and engage with the field of homiletics—with a distinctive evangelical perspective.

Along with the others who engaged in discussing the establishment of the Evangelical Homiletics Society at its very beginning, Keith Willhite and I sought to gather homileticians from across the continent, and around the world, to bring to bear in the society spirited research and thoughtful discourse. We have made advances. But we can do better. After twenty-five years we can recommit ourselves to our founding principles as noted on our website:

The Evangelical Homiletics Society is an academic society formed for the exchange of ideas related to the instruction of biblical preaching. EHS's goals are as follows: to advance the cause of biblical preaching through the promotion of a biblical-theological approach, increase competence for teachers of preaching, integrate the fields of communication, biblical studies, and theology, and to provide scholarly contributions to the field of homiletics.

We want to commit ourselves as a society to be an engaging, thoughtful, biblical, intellectually-stretching think tank that makes a difference in the teaching of homiletics, the

theology of homiletics, the intersection of various disciplines with homiletics, the practice of homiletics—and so much more. There are vistas of potential research for established scholars as well as burgeoning student-scholars in this ever-expanding field of homiletics.

No one should misconstrue what is being said here as a call to abandon our society's Statement of Faith or commitment to Scripture. These are anchors from which we dare not come untethered lest we make a shipwreck of the faith. That said, the call here *is* an invitation for more critical engagement by our society's membership with theories and presuppositions that have received little attention heretofore and with discoveries outside the field of homiletics that intersect with our field.

A handful of papers on speech-act theory have been presented to our conference in recent years. While this theory seems to apply well enough for the interpretation of meaning on a sentence level, no one among us has yet to analyze whether it works on a larger scale. Does it apply for the interpretation of an entire epistle or psalm? Or even has anyone provided a critical assessment of the presuppositions of speech-act theory and its implications for homiletics and theology—positive and negative?

We assume that every pericope has only one authorially intended meaning. What then are we to make of archaeological discoveries that suggest texts like Genesis chapter one may be understood on multiple levels? (See, Gregg Davidson and Kenneth J. Turner, *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One: A Multi-Layered Approach* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2021].)

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the theological interpretation of Scripture movement? Do practitioners of TIS assume too much?

Historically, the study of homiletics has been dominated by Western patterns of thought. How might a more comprehensive world homiletic challenge or reshape our Western presuppositions and practices?

Technological advances are affecting our society in a plethora of ways. The aforementioned *Social Dilemma* indicates that computer processing speeds have increased, roughly

speaking, by a trillion percent since the 1960s, whereas our automobiles' speeds have only doubled over the same time. The documentary also refers to a MIT study that found fake news on Twitter spreads six times faster than true news. Powerfully persuasive technologies vie with the pulpit every week. What hope does preaching have to continue persuading social media-saturated hearers? Is it not past the time for homileticians to rethink the art of persuasion in the maelstrom of an emerging metaverse?

Advances in neural imaging and brain mapping have spawned a number of advocacy groups that are now demanding we no longer think of what were formerly termed "disabilities" as deficiencies but as differences. How does that paradigm shift challenge our views of sin, what it means to be human, how we view the body of Christ and its preaching, how to invite the neurodiverse into a relationship with God, what sanctification looks like for the empathically-impaired, the place of guilt and shame in today's pulpit, etcetera, etcetera?

Consider the arts. The Bible makes much of food, clothing, architecture, music, and story-telling. How do we keep these artistic passages artsy in our sermons? How do we avoid discussing them in dry propositional terms?

What about the recent studies in the use of eye contact, voice and body and its impact on preaching and delivery? How can we leverage these discoveries and apply them to preaching?

Preaching's history is punctuated by great pulpiteers—from the golden-mouthed John Chrysostom to the late E. K. Bailey. Who are the great pulpiteers today? How and should they be emulated or recognized? Are there any? While the traditional Black church still appreciates grand oratory, why do White congregations only seem to appreciate it when it is done by a visiting Black minister? Must all White preaching be so conversational?

Perhaps some of the foregoing topics and questions have grabbed your attention. You may be thinking, "I'd like to explore that." Or, you may feel your blood boiling as you think, "That's just wrong!" Either way, great! You just may be one of the catfish

that our EHS tank desperately needs. So, do some reading outside your preferred waters, start a conversation with someone with whom you disagree, propose a paper, submit an article, show up and speak out during our annual conferences, learn to disagree agreeably, become a true scholar and gentleman/gentlelady, stretch your thinking, and, in the process, stretch your colleagues' as well. All of us will be better off for it.

NOTES

1. Chuck Swindoll, *Come Before Winter* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985), 335.