

Homiletics 'master' dies at age 89

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

David G. Buttrick, best known as “a master of homiletic design,” died April 22, at age 89. His obituary did not give a cause of death.

Buttrick was professor of homiletics at Vanderbilt Divinity School for almost 20 years and also taught at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Iliff School of Theology, among other schools.

“David was passionate about the art of preaching and a prolific scholar,” Dean Emilie Townes of Vanderbilt Divinity said in a statement. “He influenced many generations of great homileticians and was a consultant on worship to the Commission on Church Unity and to several Protestant denominations.”

Buttrick authored many essays and articles as well as 19 books, including the three-volume project *Speaking Parables, Speaking Jesus, and Speaking Conflict*.

Much preaching in past decades, beginning with Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, has seen the kingdom of God as utopian and optimistic, Buttrick said in a 2011 interview with *Homiletics Online*. “The theme of the kingdom of God was always what Jesus was preaching,” he said. “The 20th century lopped it right off.” As a result, Christianity lost its eschatology, and when that happens, preaching about God’s mighty acts starts to be in the past tense, he said.

“Biblical passages in themselves betray a movement of thought, whereas traditional homiletic, particularly coming out of the 19th century and into the 20th century, was static, point-making,” Buttrick said. “The question is how to create language that moves in consciousness and forms and changes people.”