

**“Truth Through Personality”  
An Analysis of the Role of *Ethos* in Preaching**

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**Abstract:** This paper will examine the prominent role of *ethos* in preaching by surveying rhetorical and homiletical literature. It will consider some problems with that role, and it will suggest implications.

Good exegesis and good homiletics depends on asking the right questions of the biblical text. H. Grady Davis and Haddon Robinson have given us some very good questions:<sup>1</sup>

What is the author talking about?

What is the author saying about what he’s talking about?

What does it mean?

Is it true?

So what? What difference does it make?

Good sermon listening requires that listeners also ask these questions of the biblical text. But listeners are engaging not only the text, but a preacher as well. Intuitively and subconsciously, they ask questions about the preacher also:

What kind of man is this?

Is she striving to love people the way she is telling me I should?

Is this person filled with the Holy Spirit?

These are questions about *ethos*, that is, the *character* of the preacher. How the listener answers these questions has a great effect on how successful the preacher and sermon are in transforming lives for Christ.

In this paper I will survey various literature on the role of *ethos* in preaching, positing that *ethos* plays an important role in the sermon event. I will consider some problems that come from such a prominent role. Finally, I will suggest some implications regarding the role of *ethos* in preaching.

### **Survey of Literature**

The starting point for discussing *ethos* in preaching is Aristotle. In *Rhetoric* he wrote of the influence that *ethos* (character), in addition to *logos* (the actual content of the speech) and *pathos* (the feelings or passion ignited by a speech), can have in the public speaking event. He wrote, “Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others . . . his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, 1958, p. 26; Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 1980, pp. 41, 81-96.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I, ii.

Indeed, Aristotle was “interested in the way the character of the speaker affected what the speaker said.”<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle has influenced thinking about rhetoric and homiletics for over two millennia.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine, a teacher of secular rhetoric before following Christ, emphasized the importance of God’s truth in proclamation, but did not diminish the weighty role of *ethos* in the speaker.<sup>4</sup>

Jumping to the twentieth century, John Stott has addressed the role of *ethos* in preaching in his seminal book *Between Two Worlds*. “[Church members] naturally look for the fruit of the Spirit . . . the ripening of Christian character.”<sup>5</sup> He continues, “We cannot hide what we are. Indeed, what we are speaks as plainly as what we say. When these two voices blend, the impact of the message is doubled.”<sup>6</sup>

Stott cites Spurgeon, who described a good preacher but a bad Christian by saying that he “preached so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he never ought to enter it again.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, Stott declares that “the practice of preaching cannot be divorced from the person of the preacher.”<sup>8</sup>

This sentiment is echoed in what has arguably been the most influential homiletical discourse in the modern era, Phillips Brooks’ 1877 series of lectures at Yale.

Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. . . Truth through Personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being.<sup>9</sup>

According to Brooks, for good or ill, the preacher cannot “get out of the way.” There is an inherent *presence* of the preacher during the sermon event. Preaching is not a dual activity between the listener and the Word of God. It is a trio which includes the listener, the Word and the preacher.

Haddon Robinson comments on this fact:

The preacher cannot be separated from the message. Who has not heard some devout brother pray in anticipation of a sermon, “Hide our pastor behind the cross so that we may see not him but Jesus only.” We commend the spirit of such a prayer . . . Yet no

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<sup>3</sup> Loscalzo, 1995, p. 409.

<sup>4</sup> Hedahl, 1995, pp. 66-7.

<sup>5</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 1982, pp. 263-4

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 1982, p. 265.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips Brooks, 1989, pp. 25, 27.

place exists where a preacher may hide . . . The man affects his message . . . The audience does not hear a sermon, they hear a man.<sup>10</sup>

For Brooks, the reason for this emphasis on the person of the preacher is because the gospel is essentially personal. It is incarnational. “Its truest statement we know is not in dogma but in personal life,” he says.<sup>11</sup>

Not only does character play a part, it makes the difference between a true sermon and a speech that falls short of such a high calling.

And preaching is the bringing of truth through personality. It must have both elements. It is in the different proportion in which the two are mingled that the difference between two great classes of sermons and preaching lies. It is in the defect of one or the other element that every sermon and preacher falls short of the perfect standard. It is in the absence of one or the other element that a discourse ceases to be a sermon, and a man ceases to be a preacher altogether.<sup>12</sup>

On the “elements of personal power” in preaching, the first is character. Brooks says, “And first among the elements of power which made success I must put the supreme importance of character, of personal uprightness and purity impressing themselves upon the men who witness them.”<sup>13</sup>

Most recently, Bryan Chapell has reintroduced Aristotle’s role of *ethos* in preaching. He associates Aristotle’s *logos*, *pathos*, *ethos* elements of influence with Paul’s statement in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, which Chapell quotes in this way: “Our gospel came to you not simply with **words** [*Logos*], but also **with power and with deep conviction** [*Pathos*]. **You know how we lived** [*Ethos*] among you for your sake.”<sup>14</sup>

Chapell expands on this by saying that “the Bible’s own emphases remind us that pastoral character remains the foundation of ministry. Preaching’s glory may be eloquence, but its heartbeat is faithfulness.”<sup>15</sup> “Character oozes out of us in our messages,” he says.<sup>16</sup>

A contrary voice is David Buttrick, who contends the notion that character has any role in preaching. In *Homiletic* he argues, “We should endorse loving, pious, generous ministers, but we should *not* argue that character speaks louder than words. Even when the notion is buttressed by an Aristotelian appeal to “ethos,” it is still theologically impossible. . . Our character does not preach.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 1980, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, 1989, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>14</sup> Chapell, 1994, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>17</sup> Buttrick, 1987, p. 458.

### **Ethos Really Does Make a Difference**

Having surveyed the literature on the role of *ethos* in preaching, we can clearly see that the vast majority of rhetoricians and homileticians agree with Aristotle in his assertion that a speaker's "character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses." Buttrick is a lonely voice indeed.

In the short time that I have been preaching in the local church (nearly two and a half years), I have seen this to be the case. Numerous times, people have mentioned that the power from my preaching comes not from my knowledge or skill, but from a deep conviction and apparent integrity. This may be especially important when those who are older in a congregation sit under the preaching of a much younger pastor. One gentleman in my congregation has continually mentioned that he is surprised when he sees so many in my generation (I am currently twenty-nine years old) who have such deep faith and conviction about the things of God and the gospel.

At another time, while teaching a Bible class, I heard a man mention how knowledgeable I was in the Scriptures. Many would attribute that to a rigorous Gordon-Conwell education. But a woman next to the man leaned over and spoke into his ear, "that's what happens when you are filled with the Spirit."

I say this not to toot my own horn, but to say that through anecdotal evidence I have learned that people place a high amount of value in the character of their pastor/preacher. *Ethos* really does speak to them. *Ethos* really does make a difference.

### **Considerations**

We must consider at least two problems when presented with an emphasis on the high role of *ethos* in preaching.

First, the conundrum of pastoral self-disclosure. If our character is such an integral part of preaching, then how much of our foibles and failings are we to disclose in preaching or in any interaction with parishioners?

On the one hand, we want to present ourselves to our congregation as fellow human beings with struggles, idiosyncrasies and even doubts. We don't want to set ourselves up as models of perfection. On the other hand, we need to be careful not to reveal too much so that our people lose confidence in us. It is not appropriate, and it is possibly dangerous, to reveal our deepest, darkest sins for public consumption.

An attempt to answer the question of pastoral self-disclosure in preaching could be as follows: if I am genuinely living a life of seeking to be more like Christ and growing spiritually, even though at times I fall short of such an ideal, then I may feel free to judiciously disclose various struggles and shortfalls in my preaching. This must be done with great care and wisdom, for many will misinterpret our words and blow them out of proportion.

John Stott says, “We should avoid extreme reactions. On the one hand, to turn the pulpit into a confessional would be inappropriate, unseemly, and helpful to nobody. Yet, on the other, to masquerade as perfect would be both dishonest in us and discouraging to the congregation.”<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, if I am harboring sinful tendencies that are severely destructive, if my marriage is out of control, or if any other such blatant mark on my character exists, then I ought to get out of the pulpit anyway. Having a Christlike character does not qualify us for preaching, but not progressively being transformed into Christlikeness does disqualify us from preaching.

Second, as we emphasize the role of *ethos* in preaching, we must be careful not to disregard the work of the Spirit in the preaching event.

It is interesting, and somewhat regrettable, that such a fine homiletician as Bryan Chapell, from whom we all have learned much, leaves out the words “with the Holy Spirit” in his quotation of 1 Thessalonians 1:5. The full text of the verse reads: “. . . because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.”

John Stott, on the other hand, says that in this text the Spirit is behind the words, the power and the conviction. He says, “That is to say, the truth of the Word, the conviction with which we speak it, and the power of its impact on others all come from the Holy Spirit.”<sup>19</sup>

We would do well as preachers to remember that we are merely fragile, clay vessels which God has chosen to use for the proclamation of his Word. While our character plays a role, it is unreliable. We will fail, but the Spirit will not.

While disagreeing with Buttrick in his overall argument against the role of *ethos* in preaching, I believe he does share some wise words when he says, “The gospel, however, is always greater than the preachers of the gospel—thank God . . . The fact is, all preachers serve Christ in brokenness, trusting in grace alone . . . So what are we thrown back on? We are flung back on a confidence in the gospel, trust in the grace of God, and prayer for the Spirit with us.”<sup>20</sup>

This is a sentiment that any Evangelical can applaud.

### **Implications**

Two implications can be drawn from our conclusion that *ethos* has a highly influential role in the preaching event.

First, there is laid an importance upon the pastor’s close relationship with his or her congregation.

Haddon Robinson cites this as one of the advantages the local pastor has over the “communication kings.” He writes, “When we stand in the pulpit, we have the credibility and

<sup>18</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 1982, p. 264.

<sup>19</sup> Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 1991, p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> Buttrick, 1987, pp. 458-59

spiritual authority that comes only from having been with people in their times of need. Our listeners know us, trust us, and see in us lives that largely back up what we preach.”<sup>21</sup>

Quentin Schultze states it this way, “Parish preachers’ ethos is determined largely by the pastor’s overall life—how he or she interacts with congregants and with the rest of the community before the eyes of the parish.”<sup>22</sup>

Phillips Brooks has stated that the pastor “who would bear fruit everywhere for humanity should root himself into some special plot of human life and draw out the richness of the earth by which he is to live at some one special point.”<sup>23</sup>

Local church pastors should (1) take warning and (2) be encouraged in this. First the warning: we cannot, week in and week out, seclude ourselves into our study. We are to spend time with our people in a variety of contexts: in the church building and in the home, in the coffee shop and in the hospital, having fun together and grieving together. For good or ill, we are examples to the flock. As such, we are to provide them with opportunities to observe us seeking to live out what we preach on Sunday morning. Sermons contribute to spiritual growth in people, but they do so in a context. Alone (I’m sorry to say) they have little effect. But as a part of a larger incarnational ministry, sermons can serve as a cornerstone.

Local church pastors should be encouraged because we have a tool for ministry in addition to sermons, namely the life we live. We have an advantage in the local church: we know our people intimately, and they know us intimately. We will slip up at times, but if we are following Jesus, they will see that and give us authority and attention when we speak from the pulpit.

The second implication deals with our preparing people to preach. In light of the highly influential role that *ethos* plays in preaching, we ought to heed the words of Phillips Brooks once again, who has said, “Preparation for the ministry . . . must be nothing less than the making of a man.”<sup>24</sup>

This was the method Jesus undertook. He did not teach his disciples rhetorical skills or techniques, but made them into men who reflected him. “When His treatment of them was complete, they stood fused like glass, and able to take God’s truth in perfectly on one side and send it out perfectly on the other side of their transparent natures.”<sup>25</sup>

Bryan Chapell calls us to be “Great Preachers,” by which he means to be great men. “Although the degree of homiletical skill will vary, God promises to perform his purposes through all who faithfully proclaim his truth. Even if your words barely crawl over the edge of the pulpit, love of God’s Word, will, and people ensures an effective spiritual ministry.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Robinson, *Making a Difference in Preaching*, 1999, p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> Quentin Schultze, 1995, p. 471.

<sup>23</sup> In Tisdale, 1995, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Brooks, , p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 1989 26.

<sup>26</sup> Chapell, 1994, 31.

Seminaries not only teach exegetes, homileticians and teachers. They also form men and women who are becoming more and more like Christ. Seminaries are to be schools of spiritual transformation. While you cannot program or demand spiritual growth, structures can be put in place to encourage and provide opportunities for such growth. Small groups, local church ministry, mentoring and accountability should all be fostered and encouraged. Evaluations should be given not just on skill and knowledge of subject matter, but on readiness for ministry as regards Christian character.

Denominational support systems and local churches should also recognize their role in helping their pastors continue to grow as men and women of God.

Of course, pastors and students preparing to preach are responsible more than seminaries and denominations and local churches. They must avail themselves not only of the structures and opportunities of these institutions, but of the means of grace that God has made available to transform us into Christlikeness. The spiritual disciplines of prayer, Scripture, fellowship, worship and the like are to be diligently practiced.

If *ethos* is such an integral part of preaching, and if preaching is an integral part of the ministry of the church, then we must do all that we can to assure that we ourselves are being formed into Christlikeness.

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