

“And Speaking of God....” A Theology for Biblical Preaching

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Abstract:

Homileticians are appropriately concerned with integrating the theoretical and practical matters involved in preparing and delivering biblical sermons. In practice, however, a solid theological grounding for preaching is often missing in homiletical courses simply due to the time pressures of ‘covering all the bases.’ This paper will discuss the rationale for a theology of preaching as well as the dynamics, qualities and motives of biblical preaching in a manner suitable for the theological prolegomena of a course in biblical homiletics.

Learning how to preach is a lot like learning anything else. We wonder where to start. Should we begin with a thorough theoretical grounding in the theology of preaching? Should we simply jump right in and start preaching and learn as we experiment? There is another option. We do not need to pit theory and practice against each other. In fact, our best learning takes place when we recognize the mutual relationship between these two. Good theory makes good practice; and good practice makes good theory. Good learning embraces these two in tandem.

The Rationale for a Theology of Biblical Preaching

Several reasons for a theology of preaching present themselves. One is that the complexity of preaching demands it. A trial and error approach might be suitable for a simple task like assembling a swing set in the back yard. However, we would shudder if our dentist announced she would be using those same tactics to deal with our fillings. On the other hand, we would be less than enthusiastic if our dentist, armed with a few charts and a well-worn copy of *Dentistry for Dummies*, confessed that we were her first ‘real’ patients. Optimal training for the complex world of dental surgery requires both theoretical grounding and supervised practice. The same holds true for preachers. Although we might have been offered opportunities to preach before being introduced to the theology of preaching, hopefully we were not audacious enough to consider ourselves to be seasoned preachers. Preaching is complex. It involves a mysterious collaboration of the divine and the human. It requires the skills of the theologian, the exegete, the pastor and the communicator. It demands the best efforts of a life long learner. So, with such significance comes the need to get grounding in the nature of the preaching task.

As is the case for every aspect of our lives as followers of Christ, we need to hear what the Bible itself says about preaching. Our preferences may change and fads may come in one era and out the other but we need to know if there is a word from God on this matter. Without this foundation we are left to judge our preaching by other standards—ones that

normally come from secular sources not sacred. Pragmatism normally rules the day for us as practical North Americans—if it works, then it must be right. We are not trying to establish a culture of suspicion which assumes that preachers with large congregations or prominent reputations must be guilty of compromising the truth. On the other hand, we want to recognize that the size of any preacher's congregation or reputation is not the litmus test of faithful preaching. The Bible will supply the standards.

A good theology of preaching will also help busy preachers set priorities in their ministries. Life and ministry are hectic these days and over-committed, over-worked pastors need to know where they should be spending their precious time. Again, without a proper understanding of the nature of preaching, pastors will tend to spend the most time at what delivers the most observable results in the shortest time. Preaching is a matter of life long stewardship, a long term investment in God's kingdom. Unless we determine its rightful place among the other tasks of ministry, we will not give it the priority it deserves.

Finally, good theory is the best way to allow for varied practice. Preaching is inherently contextual and requires each preacher to adapt to the particularities of the preaching context. Good theory paves the way for such contextualization. Nothing becomes outdated quicker than pure practice. If all preachers learn is a certain way of 'doing' sermon preparation, they will be lost when that method fails or is replaced. If we, however, learn the basic theology that grounds preaching, we are free to improvise as the situation warrants it. Good jazz musicians learn the craft of improvisation by first mastering the basics of music. Should preachers do any less?

The Dynamics of Biblical Preaching

Our attempt to present a theological understanding of the preaching event will begin by trying to visualize the dynamics inherent in the process. We will use the following diagram, called The Preaching Sphere, to serve this purpose. Following our discussion of these dynamics, we will be better suited to unpack some of the theological implications that should inform our preaching.

THE PREACHING SPHERE

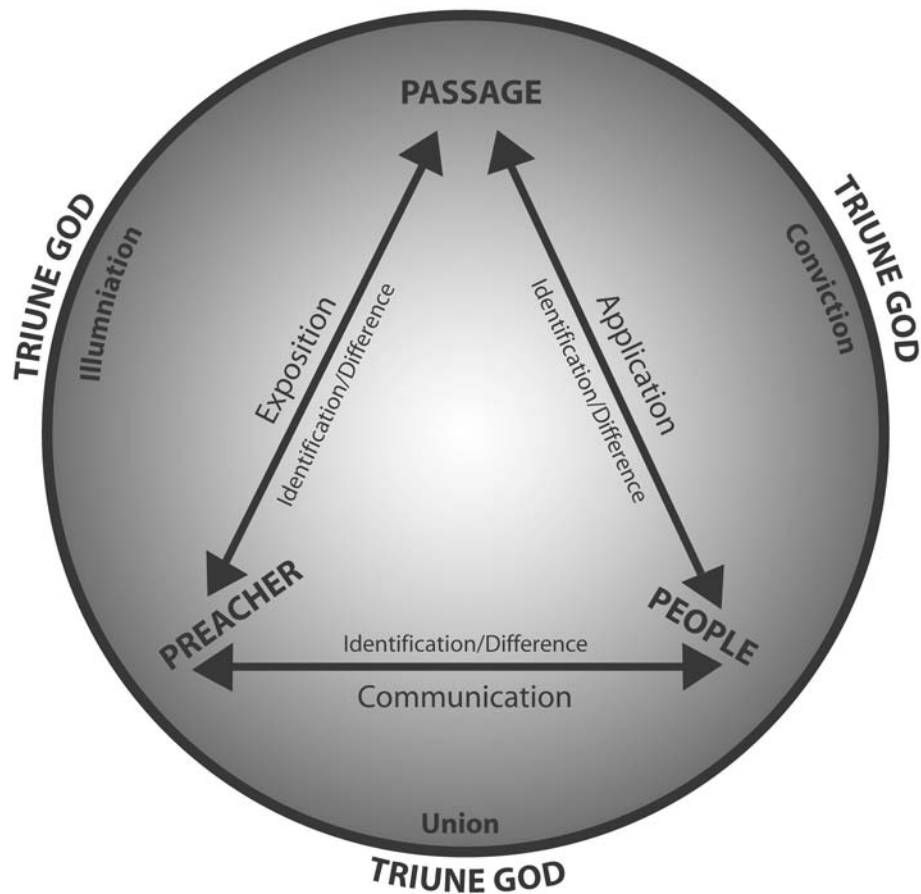


Figure 1

This is not a novel image since many teachers and students of preaching have seen a similar one before. What we are attempting to do is depict the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of preaching by using a two dimensional diagram—not an easy task. Obviously we cannot capture the eternal and infinite with either our images or words, but we would like to explore what is happening beyond the tangible encounter between preacher and biblical text. We will try to minimize the reductionism inherent in this approach as we proceed.

We begin with the sphere itself. A sphere is more than simply a two dimensional circle, it is three dimensional, like a ball. The triune God is portrayed as a sphere because of our conviction that it is God's sovereign presence and direction that surrounds the entire preaching event. Preaching is God-soaked, from first to last. It is designed, initiated, empowered and directed by him. The circle often has been used to communicate the relationship between the three persons of the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These three persons dwell in perfect harmony—what has been termed *perichoresis*, their relationship of mutual interpenetration. So rather than rigidly try to differentiate the

involvement of each of these divine persons in separate aspects of the preaching event, we simply refer to their united essence as our triune God. A Trinitarian foundation to preaching keeps us from hijacking the process and making it dependent upon our own homiletical skills.

Within the sphere we find a three-sided conversation between the passage (the biblical text to be preached), the preacher and the people (i.e. the gathered congregation). The biblical passage is placed at the top of the triad to indicate that this conversation incorporates the reciprocal relationship between each of the partners without going as far as demanding all three be granted equal authority (as is the case for some radical homileticians). None of these conversation partners may be ignored, however, if the preaching event is to be complete. Indeed the relational interdependence of all three is necessary for a holistic understanding of preaching. Omit the passage and you are left with a human dialogue between preacher and the congregation. Omit the people (or the congregation) and you speak the truth to the air. Leave out the preacher and you have a group Bible study (of course, there is nothing wrong with that; it simply is not the same as preaching).

The relationship between the passage and the preacher is a dynamic and mutual one yet we claim the biblical text has primary authority. All partners are necessary, but not all are equal. The passage—as inspired scripture—brings its influence to bear upon the preacher as it informs, makes demands, or gives comfort depending upon the message of the text. That influence is not without its tensions, however. The biblical passage was not first addressed to the contemporary preacher who serves as a ‘priestly listener’ on behalf of the local congregation, but to another audience in another place and time. So while the preacher may sense some form of identification with the situation of that original audience, there is also a certain dissonance introduced by the fact that the preacher is different in some ways (sometimes many ways) from the original recipients. It is also possible that the passage is saying something the preacher does not want to hear. Like Mark Twain once quipped, “It’s not the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand that bother me—it’s the parts I do understand!”

From the other side, the preacher brings a certain influence to bear on the passage. No preacher approaches a text without ‘baggage.’ To claim to be free of ‘baggage’ is futile and would make the preacher sub-human. These particular biases form part of the perspective each preacher brings to the text. While we try to make allowances for these biases, our limited, sinful human condition does make our understanding of the passage a bit ‘fuzzy.’ It is not an exact science. We label the result of this relationship, ‘exposition.’

As these two conversation partners are encountering each other, the hovering presence and direction of the triune God is superintending the process—normally termed, illumination. Attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit, the ministry of illumination is what Paul was referring to when he wrote:

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in

words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words (1 Corinthians 2:12,13 NIV).

Illumination is not a defense of the accuracy of our exposition. Preachers still misinterpret texts, some badly. Paul is claiming we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16) which is not to claim interpretative inerrancy for us but to remind us that through the indwelling of the Spirit we now are enabled to think on a different wavelength. That is not the same as having God's seal of approval on our every interpretation of biblical texts. If that is the case, differing interpretations of the same text by Spirit-led expositors leads us to an impasse. In our present state such interpretative ambiguity is inevitable, but even so we can take great comfort in the assurance of God's involvement in the process of exposition. The final words in this case are not ours, thankfully. It won't take very long before you realize that God is not only able to work through your exposition but many times in spite of it.

The preacher and the people (or 'congregation') are also in dynamic interrelation in this three-sided conversation. The preacher brings the weight of the passage to bear on the congregation through the medium of their relationship. As a member of the congregation specially designated to bring a word from God to them, the preacher enters a communicative covenant with those in the church. In turn, those in the church enter into a position of trust toward the preacher. Who the preacher is as well as what he says have a bearing on the success of this agreement. Tension is evident here as well. As part of the group, the preacher shares much in common with those who are listening to the sermon. However, there is a sense in which the responsibility that accompanies preaching also sets the preacher apart from the rest of the congregation. If there is an overemphasis upon the identification of preacher and people, the authority of the message tends to be muted. In extreme situations of this kind, the congregation sets the preaching agenda according to their own desires and a proper sense of hearing the whole counsel of God is lost. Preaching becomes the hollow echo of only what the people want, spoken to itching ears. The reverse is also true. Emphasize the difference between preacher and people and we have the preacher become a thundering outsider easily dismissed by those who are on the 'inside.'

If we summarize this interaction between preacher and people as 'communication,' we need to recognize the intensely personal nature of this relationship. The character and personal integrity of both the preacher and the people are integral to the communication process. As far as we preachers are concerned, we need to understand that who we are, what we do and what we say must be integrated. Persuasive communication within a community best takes place when a holy person speaks the truth well (although even then there are no guarantees—ask Jeremiah!).

Again, we are not left to our own devices to assure the proper dynamics that ensure effective communication. The continued ministry of the Holy Spirit serves to bring about this unity in diversity among the people of God (Ephesians 4:1-16). What appears to be humanly impossible can be accomplished by the Spirit's work. With all the potential for

interpersonal disaster within any given congregation, the Spirit still is able to bring peace and unity into our midst so we might hear from him and live. Thanks be to God!

The third side of this conversation is the relationship between the people and the passage. The ultimate desire of the preacher is to have been faithful enough in the exposition and communication of the passage that the congregation is motivated to respond to it. This we term ‘application.’ A tension also exists between people and the passage, somewhat reminiscent of the one that exists between passage and preacher. We might expect this since the preacher is also part of the congregation. Who the people are will affect their hearing of the passage and any given passage will also bear a message which is a combination of that which ‘connects’ with them and what does not. Every congregation is a mixture of people, some of whom ‘get it’ and some who don’t on any given Sunday. This can be the preacher’s nightmare if we assume it is the preacher’s task to illicit listener response. We obviously would prefer not to be providing additional obstacles to application by our preaching, but in the final analysis, the end result of our preaching is out of our control.

Conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11). Fully understanding the work of the Spirit is beyond our limited comprehension—no-one would dispute that. Our assurance of the Spirit’s ministry in the preaching of the gospel does put our contribution to the process into perspective. You will hear congregational members mention convicting parts of your sermon that you did not intend or may not even remember saying. What you consider homiletical masterpieces may fall lifeless into a collective pit of yawns. Times when you come to the pulpit dry and with nothing much to say can be given life beyond your wildest imagination. Such is the mysterious, wonderful work of the Spirit of truth. We simply take what we have been given by his grace, offer it in faith and then stand back and watch him work.

After this guided tour of The Preaching Sphere, three areas require special emphasis. One, we hope we were painfully obvious in pointing out the God-centeredness of the preaching event. This is not to encourage laziness on our part, but rather awe. There is so much about preaching that is beyond our grasp that we are freed to approach our small but important part with humble obedience.

Two, preaching is a highly spiritual, personal and relational act. We should never conceive of preaching as the preacher and a text locked together in a room until the preacher is able to get a sufficient understanding and enough illustrative material so this text will ‘preach.’ Preaching should be seen in relation to our lives in Christ as a spiritual discipline as well as a pastoral art. Anything less would short change what preaching can become.

The third implication is the essential role of each of the three conversation partners under the watchful eyes of the triune God. To neglect any of these partners is to skew the preaching process. This is not to say this conversation trumps God’s ability to make his will known but a fully integrated relationship of these three creates the optimum dynamic

for God to do his work. From our side of the equation, exposition, communication and application should be inextricably linked as part of the overall preaching event.

The Dangers of Dynamic Imbalance

Something is awry when we overemphasize one of these dynamics to the neglect of the others. As a matter of fact it is easy enough to observe those preachers who emphasize exposition at the expense of communication and application. These members of the ‘exposition school’ see their commitment to the exposition of an authoritative Bible as the urgent emphasis for our times. With mounting levels of biblical illiteracy, both inside and outside the church, it is hard to downplay the need for solid biblical exposition. With the best of intentions, this school goes about the task of bringing a clear word from God through the process of careful exegesis and an unflagging commitment to the authority of Scripture. Some of the members of this school are among the best known of our Bible teachers and preachers. Widespread readership of their books and blogs attest to their impact and to the hunger among many for what these expositors have to say.

However, as can be the case in other dimensions of life, an area of strength may become a potential weakness if not balanced against other related concerns. If we feel our primary task as preachers is to explain the biblical text correctly, we may inadvertently encourage a culture of listening without doing—a purely cerebral faith. It may also be possible to emphasize the meaning of a particular text at the expense of the overall biblical story of redemption. When we consider the explanation of the text to be our primary task, application may then be equated either with exhortation/admonition or considered to be the sole province of the Holy Spirit. While the former can indeed be an integral part of preaching a text, not every text is hortatory. We may fall prey to a subtle moralism in our preaching. The latter is, of course, true in what it affirms (preaching, in the end, is a ‘God-thing’), but begs the question of the preacher’s role in the conversation (remember, we cannot neglect any of the three conversation partners). It is also possible that we hold our views with such passion that we too quickly dismiss or disparage the perspectives of others, even other evangelicals.

As a balance to those of the ‘exposition school,’ preachers from the ‘application school,’ who emphasize application often to the neglect of exposition and communication, would suggest that the purpose of preaching has more to do with life transformation than information explained from the biblical text. While members of this school may be reacting to a caricature of expositional models, their concern is for the applicability and relevance of preaching to contemporary life. There is no hint here that the Bible is out-of-date or irrelevant, but their desire is to highlight the ‘so what?’ and the ‘now what?’ aspects of the text in specific ways. Exegesis is prized, but as a means of arriving at the ‘business end’ of the text and not as an end in itself. Main points of the sermon often highlight the application value of the text rather than seeing application as being chronologically or logically secondary to its explanation. It is hard not to appreciate the desire to highlight the life-transforming power of God through his Word.

We may, however, overbalance our emphasis on application so that our sermons become anthropocentric in focus. Moralism and pragmatism may be potential dangers for us if we are not vigilant. Too many ‘how to...’ sermons make for a rather self-centered congregation.

Some preachers chose a moderating emphasis between the previous two. These would be of the ‘communication school.’ The fact we saved it for last is not to suggest that it must of necessity combine the best aspects and be immune to the potential misapplications of the previous two schools. Preachers of the ‘communication school’ desire to bring the message of the biblical text to bear on the contemporary congregation in a way that leads to personal response. In a sense, these preachers attempt to balance the message of the text with the rhetorical task of relevant communication. So both exposition and application are important to them. Members of this school often feel free to experiment with different sermon forms so long as they serve the main thrust of the text. What is paramount here is that the main theme or idea of the text is unearthed and communicated in a relevant way. Again, there is ample reason to applaud such an emphasis.

It may be possible, however, for us to focus so intently on the individual pericope that we lose sight of the overarching sweep of the redemption story. So moralism might be a possibility for us here as well. There also may be some texts that by their unique form or complexity of argument/movement defy our best efforts to ‘freeze dry’ them into one main theme or idea. Some texts do more than ‘teach,’ so the use of more cerebral terms like ‘idea’ or ‘proposition’ might skew our reading of the text. We therefore run the risk of miscommunicating the text on those occasions. If we place too much weight on the communication skills of the preacher, we may subtly fall prey to a very anthropocentric homiletic.

Practitioners from each of these schools have much to learn from each other. We would hope that all of us may progress toward an approach to preaching that keeps all three in balance. So rather than viewing these ‘schools’ as rivals, the insights brought by each group may contribute to our desire to preach with accuracy, passion, relevance and life-transforming power.

The Qualities of Biblical Preaching

At this point we need to stop and assess our progress. We have used The Preaching Sphere to gain some insight into the dynamics of the preaching event. Our emphasis on the dynamic rather than the descriptive was purposeful. It is often preferable to perceive or conceive of something in action before we attempt to define it in descriptive terms. With an understanding of the dynamics behind us we now turn to the task of defining and describing the act of preaching.

In terms of a working definition of preaching, we would say: *Christian preaching is the proclamation of the gospel of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father.* Preaching is revelatory in that, by the enabling of the Holy Spirit, it presents

the living Christ who shows us God the Father. If this definition is sufficient, then we need to unpack our theology of preaching by offering a series of descriptive statements.

Preaching is Trinitarian in Nature

As you might have gathered from our definition, we see preaching as Trinitarian. The fullness of the Godhead inhabits the preaching event. As we noted already, we preach the gospel of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father. In this way we encounter the triune God first by the Spirit's ministry and through the Son who reveals the Father to us. We also are aware that how we come to know the triune God does not 're-order' the persons of the Godhead. Ultimately God's triune being remains the same: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So it is also possible to see preaching from this ontological perspective (i.e. how God 'is' rather than how God 'is known'). From this perspective we might say: God reveals Christ by the Spirit to us. God the Father is the subject here; he is the one who initiates the revealing of himself in Christ. The person of Christ is the direct object, the embodiment of God. God the Holy Spirit is the agent in whom this revelation is made (by his work in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, as well as the inspiration, illumination and conviction of the Truth). We are the indirect object of this revealing action. While God is subject, verb and object, we are the indirect object, the intended recipients of this act of revelation. In sum, regardless of the perspective taken, preaching is Trinitarian by nature.

Our preaching also takes on a Trinitarian shape. The doctrine of the Trinity (especially the doctrine of the 'social' Trinity) depicts God in being, doing and relating so our preaching is not only to be real, but dynamic and relational (vertically with God and horizontally with others). It is real in the sense that it comes from a real God through a real preacher to a real congregation (we will say more about this later when we speak of preaching as embodied). It is dynamic rather than static in that it is an active event. Ray Anderson notes:

A theology of preaching thus emerges from within the context of the preached Word and not in abstraction from it. This means that there are truths within the inspired Word of Scripture that are only discovered and revealed through the praxis of teaching and preaching. This does not mean that careful exegetical methods of determining what the biblical text says can be disregarded. On the contrary, we must take up the biblical text with full commitment to its intrinsic character as the Word of God written. At the same time, by the authority of the Scripture itself, we must take with the same seriousness the praxis of the Holy Spirit by which our preaching and teaching reaches God's purpose in the transformation of human hearts and lives. Within such a context, one might define ecclesial praxis as a *dynamic human process of critical reflection carried out* (2001, pp.50,51).

Preaching is not only dynamic but personal. Our active reflection is based upon our vertical and horizontal relatedness. Andrew Purves says that

...through our union with Christ, whereby we share in the life of Jesus Christ, the sermon becomes a present form of the incarnation, an enfleshment in speech

today of the once historical and always eternal and living one Word of God... Preaching, in other words, is a theological act in the same true sense: it is an act whereby God “speaks,” for it is God’s address to the congregation, and not just a human reflective word concerning God. It is God’s personal and active Word of address to the people gathered through the voice of the minister (2004, p.157).

Preaching is Christological in Content

When we preach the Christian gospel we preach the Christ who is the gospel. That is why Paul identifies the gospel he preached as being Christ-soaked:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (1 Corinthians 15:3-8 NIV).

Paul can be quoted as “...preaching the gospel of his [God’s] Son... (Rom 1:9); and saying “...we preach Christ crucified...”(1 Cor. 1:23); “...it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead...” (1 Cor. 15:12); and “...we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord...” (2 Cor. 4:5). Preaching, then, aims to show how the saving news of Christ affects all of life. This is qualitatively more than the ‘how to’ fare served up from some pulpits that differs little in content from that of pop psychology, self-help books or day-time television gurus.

Preaching is Doxological in Purpose

The ultimate purpose of preaching is no different than any other action. We preach to the glory of God. This, of course, is not to deny that the preaching event is already very much God-centered. We, however, desire God to be honored in the act of preaching his gospel. Paul reminds us:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:13, 14 NIV).

Preaching is to bring glory to God in any context, but most often preaching takes place within a service of worship. In this context, preaching, in its own way contributes to our worship of God as do the other aspects of corporate worship. There should be no competition between these acts of worship but rather cooperation so that God may be praised in ways beyond the speaking, hearing and responding involved in preaching.

Preaching is Ecclesiological in Context

The gospel is the message entrusted to the church and thus belongs to the entire church—not solely to those in ordained ministry. This message, however, is not to be hoarded or muted by the church but rather spread enthusiastically to the whole world. And again, the entire church is called to be involved in spreading the gospel, even as it was in the earliest days of the church (Acts 8:4).

The church gains its life from the gospel so part of the preaching task is to keep the gospel front and center in the minds of her members. The same gospel that brought us to Christ keeps us in Christ. As the life blood of the church, preaching applies the gospel to all of faith and conduct so we can act as God desires. This gospel may be veiled among those who are perishing (2 Cor. 4:3), but should not be so in the church where God has “...made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6b NIV).

It is the church who recognizes and authorizes certain of her members to preach this gospel. Not to be confused as a contradiction to the fact that the gospel is given to all the church and should be shared by all, this truth simply acknowledges the fact that some from among the body of believers are given the privilege and responsibility of concentrating on a ministry of preaching and teaching the Word. Preachers come from among the membership as witnesses to the truth of the gospel. Our current practice of hiring a ‘religious professional from the outside’ might not be the best approach unless we want to preach to strangers. Studies on preaching recognize the importance of the preacher’s membership in the congregation. By membership, we mean a deep and meaningful relationship between pastor and congregation. Just ‘being there’ is not enough. If the preacher’s character is important (as we will see below), so is his identity as a member of that congregation. This identity is both earned in and given by the local body and the preacher will not be trusted or ‘heard’ at this deep visceral level until this bonding takes place. The most effective preachers are caring local pastors. Charles Jefferson’s stern warning, now seasoned by a century of insight, is worth heeding:

It is because men limp and crawl in pastoral work that they stumble and fall in the pulpit. Because they desert the people through the week, God deserts them on Sunday. A man [cannot] be an ideal preacher unless he has a shepherd heart ([1912], p.144).

A possible question forming in your minds right now might be, “Must the preacher always be ‘one of us’ to be heard by us?” Is there a role for those from the ‘outside’ to bring a word from God for us? Yes, in the sense that the church is much broader than its local expression, we can benefit from itinerant preaching as well as from the preaching by ‘celebrity’ preachers at large conferences and gatherings. But this kind of ‘preaching to everyone in general’ should only supplement and never supplant ‘preaching to us in particular’ that only can be done by one who knows us, loves us and is identified with us. For those of you who worship in mega-church environments, it may mean finding other more personal voices in preaching to complement what is normally the strong pulpit ministry of your senior pastor.

It is possible, however, to overemphasize the importance of the church for preaching by adopting a view that believes anything a preacher can say to the congregation can be better said by the congregation itself. The result is a round table approach to preaching or a radical conversational homiletic that can view the congregation on equal or greater footing than the authority of the biblical text. Despite the best efforts of its proponents to portray this view as a reasoned response to the changes brought about by our postmodern times, its reactionary character is evident. They have reacted (and rightly so) against overly authoritarian and manipulative pulpit tactics but have ‘thrown out the preacher with the bath water.’ Stools have replaced pulpits, dialogues ‘on the fly’ have taken the place of ‘univocal’ sermons, and raised platforms have been razed in an effort to empower the congregation to speak truth to itself. Helpful in what it affirms, this view is also naïve in what it ignores.

One is that the church is not a flat democracy with every member equally equipped to instruct the entire body of believers. There is indeed unity in the church but it is a unity empowered by the Holy Spirit who gives members *differing* gifts as he wills it (1 Cor. 12:4-31a; Rom 12:3-8). Not all have the same gift; some can indeed have keen insights, some do not. An ‘open mike’ approach to the sermon does not appropriately address past ‘preacherly’ excesses. The antidote to authoritarian preaching is not to throw out preaching (or the preacher) but to remember where all authority comes from and how to steward it wisely and humbly. P. T. Forsythe issues a helpful reminder to us all:

The one great preacher in history, I would contend, is the Church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the Church to preach. Yet so that he is its echo but its living voice, not the echo of its consciousness but the organ of its Gospel. Either he gives the Church utterance, or he gives it insight into the gospel it utters. He is to preach to the Church from the Gospel so that with the Church he may preach the Gospel to the world. He is so to preach to the Church that he shall also preach *from* the Church. That is to say, he must be a sacrament to the Church, that with the Church he may become a missionary to the world (1964, p.53).

Two, these radical approaches smack too much of what works locally writ large. Just because an approach may work well in a location or two hardly makes it the next universal approach to preaching. If we learn anything from this, it would be there is no universal approach to preaching at least in terms of style and structure. Preaching is context-sensitive.

Preaching is Evangelistic in Effect

Even a quick survey of the biblical vocabulary used to portray the act of preaching shows the close relationship between preaching and evangelism. Confining ourselves to the New Testament (there is Old Testament vocabulary for preaching as well), the term *euangelizomai* translated as ‘preach the gospel’ (e.g. Rom 1:15; 10:15; 1 Cor. 9:16; Gal 1:11; Eph 3:8; Heb 4:2; 1 Pet 1:12) is closely related to the word for ‘gospel’ (*euangelion*). Paul tells the Romans:

I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel (*euangelizomai*) also to you who are at Rome. I am not ashamed of the gospel (*euangelion*), because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for the Jew first, then for the Gentile (Rom 1:14-16 NIV).

The common word for ‘proclaim or preach’ (*kerusso*) is often linked with ‘the gospel’ (e.g. Matt 26:13; Mark 13:10; 14:9; Gal 2:2; Col 1:23) as well as ‘repentance and forgiveness’ (Luke 24:47) and ‘the kingdom’ (e.g. Matt 10:5-7; 24:14; Luke 9:2).

Jesus’ own programmatic statement of his ministry, made before his neighbors in Nazareth, paints a holistic picture of evangelistic preaching:

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:17-21 NIV).

Jesus sees Isaiah’s evangelistic vision as his own. As he went about proclaiming the good news and doing good deeds, he left us an example that we might follow in his steps.

Preaching is Didactic in Intention

Can preaching teach? Yes, it can and it should. Should we maintain a distinction between preaching and teaching? Yes, we can and we should. Should we make this distinction an absolute one? No, we cannot and should not. While preaching and teaching are distinct ministries, they do coinhere to some degree. Driving a wedge between the two, as some have attempted to do, flies in the face of their rather enigmatic relationship. There is a teaching function evident in most preaching. Even in recounting his preaching of the gospel to the Corinthians, Paul introduces the summary of the content of the gospel message by saying, “for what I received I passed on to you as of first importance...” (1 Cor. 15:3a NIV). This is the language of passing on traditional material, the work normally assigned to a teacher. It makes sense that if the gospel has played a formative role in the existence of the believing community, part of the preacher’s responsibility would be to keep the community connected to this life-giving narrative. James Thompson reminds us that “...transformation occurs where the community is constantly reminded of the story that brought it into existence” (2006, p.117). Charles Bartow adds this explanation:

While preaching is, in the first instance, narrative discourse, a form of discourse uniquely suited to kerygmatic statement,...it also is, at the same time, discursive and expository. The story told is a story interpreted, explained, made sense of, with reference to the church’s corporate and historic memory articulated in creed and confession. *Kerygma* [i.e. proclamation] and *didache* [i.e. teaching] are

joined; they are, in fact, the two sides of the single coin of the gospel. They are joined in the canon of Scripture, and they cannot be disjoined in preaching that bears witness to that to which the Scriptures themselves bear witness. This means that preachers inevitably are teachers. Their work has a catechetical dimension (1997, p.104).

The teaching function involved in preaching is found in more than the content of the gospel message itself. We see it in the ethical implications that flow from the message itself.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:11-14 NIV).

Paul is connecting the believers’ faith with their behavior. Gordon Fee explains: ...Paul appeals that the same grace that makes salvation available to all should instruct God’s people in proper behavior (v. 12). Salvation, however, is not merely a present reality; it also includes a sure future for God’s people (v. 13), because the same Lord Jesus Christ who has already come as the manifestation of God’s grace (v. 14) will come again as the manifestation of God’s glory (v. 13). The aim of that grace was to create a people for God who would be characterized by their “zeal for good works” (v. 14b) (1988, p.193).

Preaching is Eschatological in Prospect

The eschatological language in the above passage is hard to miss. Preaching is performed in the present but points to the ultimate culmination of events introduced by the ‘glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.’ We are aware that the good news that is Jesus and was preached by him was the good news of the kingdom (Matt 4:23). This kingdom has not only come but is coming and so the ‘already but not yet’ dynamic that colors all of our faith affects our preaching as well. Our preaching is to be a celebration of who we are through Christ but also of what we may become in him. Preachers may need, from time to time, a reminder that we do not preach a realized eschatology expecting perfection right away. Such an attitude not only disregards God’s sovereign intention for history and his design for our sanctification but also ignores the preacher’s own sinful imperfections.

Preaching at its core is hopeful, even when it must warn or rebuke. As preachers of the gospel we participate in God’s grand plan of redemption which should put our preaching ministries into perspective. Paul seemed to have such a big picture understanding of how of his preaching ministry fit into a grander scheme when he wrote the opening words of his letter to Titus:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God’s elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness—a *faith and*

knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior (Titus 1:1-3 NIV, italics mine).

Preaching is Embodied in Form

Our entire bodies are employed in preaching, not just our voices. We ask with Paul, "...And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them" (Rom 10:14b)? Is the preaching of the gospel dependent upon the bodily presence of the preacher? Is this an example of where the primitive conditions of the first century have been superseded by the technological advancements of our own age? What about those who hear the gospel through means of the media? What is the relationship between a written sermon and a preached sermon? What about the increasing use of video in preaching? What about technological enhancements like sound amplification and simultaneous video delivery of sermons in multi-site congregations? These innovations have indeed aided the spread of the gospel message but they do exact a cost. It is naïve to think otherwise. While we could hardly advocate a complete moratorium on these 'enhancements,' we need to remember they do have an effect on the message. In the truest sense, preaching is an embodied oral/aural event. Whatever we can do to keep our preaching fully embodied is really what enhances this full bodied gospel.

A more important issue relates to the life of the preacher. Words are not enough. Our lives as preachers need to support what we say. We know ourselves that we are usually not persuaded by speakers who lack integrity. Sadly, this situation is not only true of fast talking salesmen and politicians but is wide spread among preachers as well. In these days of high profile scandals among ministry leaders, we all need to be reminded of the necessity of having a transparent integrity both in and out of the pulpit. Again, Paul serves as a good model. Note his words to the believers in Thessalonica: "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8 NIV). This is an example worth imitating.

Motives for Biblical Preaching

So why would we want to give our lives to the ministry of preaching? Such a task might seem daunting after all we have just explored. There are many good reasons. Here are three.

God's Communicative Character

We worship a God who desires to communicate with his creation—to disclose his will and ways to those he has created in his image. All of scripture assumes this. The Bible would not exist without it. The triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, shares in this

commitment to communication. The author of Hebrews describes God the Father in the opening words of his epistle:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe (Hebrews 1:1, 2 NIV).

God the Son shares the same communicative nature. John writes, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18 NIV). A similar character is shared by God the Holy Spirit. In reference to the Spirit, Jesus said: “He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you” (John 16:14, 15 NIV). If God is by nature one who communicates, that should be a motivating factor for those of us who are his children.

God’s Desire for the Lost to be Found

God is not merely a communicator by nature but also a missionary. He wants the lost found and the light to shine on those who dwell in darkness. Jesus’ mission on earth to seek and save those who were lost (Luke 19:10) is an echo of the Father’s same desire (Matt 18:14). This same God wants our lives to reflect the glory of the gospel, for in the words of Paul, “This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:3, 4 NIV). Our call to preach is given its power by God’s own mission. God’s mission (termed the *missio Dei*) has been to initiate and sustain his evangelistic agenda of which we are his junior partners.

God’s Command to Preach

For those who still need convincing, the plain fact of the matter is that God has commanded us to preach. The commission given by Christ to the church involves, both directly and indirectly, the preaching of the gospel (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16: 15, 16; Luke 24:45-49; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:7, 8). In light of this divine authority, Paul would add his apostolic voice, in the memorable words penned to Timothy:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction (2 Timothy 4:1, 2 NIV).

Do we need another reason?

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