

“Persuasive Dialogue in the Preaching of Paul”

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Abstract:

This paper will refute the assertion, espoused by contemporary proponents of dialogical/conversational preaching (e.g., John McClure, Lucy Rose, and Doug Pagitt), that persuasion and dialogue are mutually exclusive. Paul’s theology of preaching as well as his dialogical practices will provide the basis for asserting that persuasion and dialogue can and should coexist.

Introduction

Television viewers are no longer content to hold the remote control passively. It is not enough to flip from one network to another or control the volume. They want to participate in the proceedings. All the major networks have responded. The wild CBS reality show *Big Brother* enables the audience to choose which house guest is banished from the show and disqualified for the million dollar prize. While judges determine the initial entries on the Fox hit *American Idol*, the American public ultimately selects the winner of the show. Similarly, ABC’s *Dancing with the Stars* empowers America to select their favorite dancing couple and NBC’s *America’s Got Talent* makes anyone with access to a cell phone or the World Wide Web a judge of the nationwide talent show.

The push for participation is also being felt in the pulpit. The denominational publication, *Texas Baptist Standard*, featured a cartoon depicting a preacher turning from the pulpit to look at a laptop computer. The caption read, “Before I conclude, let’s check what the participants in our On-line Sermon Poll voted my conclusion should be.” (Lapine, 20 Feb 2005, 4) Although suggestions for interactive online sermon polls are rare, suggestions abound for congregational participation in sermon development, delivery, and evaluation. Three recent homiletics texts have dealt specifically with dialogical or conversational preaching. John S. McClure, Lucy Atkinson Rose, and Doug Pagitt have championed the need for more congregational involvement in the homiletical process. While many pastors and authors have mentioned the need for interaction between pulpit and pew, McClure, Rose, and Pagitt have expanded the horizons of congregational involvement to the point that they contest the notion that the sermon should be persuasive. This paper refutes the assertion that preaching must be either dialogical or persuasive. The paper argues from the example of Paul in Acts 17:1-4 that preaching can involve and persuade the congregation. First, Paul’s example in Acts 17:1-4 is presented. Then the assertions of McClure, Rose, and Pagitt are analyzed in light of Paul’s example.

Acts 17:1-4

“Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to

Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women (Acts 17:1-4)⁺”

Paul reasoned with the Jews at the synagogue in Thessalonica. The nature and result of that reasoning is central to this paper. Therefore, the Greek term used to describe Paul's interaction in Thessalonica, *διαλέγομαι*, is explored. Then, the typical patterns of synagogue worship are considered. Finally, the results of Paul's interaction are analyzed.

Διαλέγομαι

In classical and Hellenistic Greek, *διαλέγομαι* ~~primarily represents~~ translated “converse” or “discussion.” (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. “*διαλέγομαι*”) The interaction described by *διαλέγομαι* in the New Testament period, ranges from conversation to argument. The term could be translated simply, “to speak or preach.” Schrenk applies this interpretation to the uses in Acts. He interprets *διαλέγομαι* in Acts as, “delivering of religious lectures or sermons.” (TDNT, s.v. “*διαλέγομαι*”) However, it is likely that Schrenk's interpretation is too simplistic. If the term *διαλέγομαι* was intended simply to communicate that Paul preached, then Luke could have utilized the vocabulary that he had already employed to describe Paul's preaching in the previous chapters. Kemmler contends, “Have we not too quickly docketed this word under the heading ‘preaching’ without taking the time to consider the particular meaning conveyed by this word.” (Kemmler 1975, 19-21)

Arndt and Gingrich note that *διαλέγομαι* was often used of “instructional discourse that frequently includes exchange of opinion.” Louw and Nida define *διαλέγομαι* as, “to argue about differences of opinion.” C. K. Barrett sees three potential interpretations for *διαλέγομαι*, each encompassing portions of the views expressed above. First, the word could simply imply dialogue. Second, the term could describe a discussion between two or more persons. Finally, *διαλέγομαι* could indicate a situation where one person discusses a subject in front of a group, “as in a sermon or lecture.” (Barrett 1998, 810) Gilbert Callaway concludes that when *διαλέγομαι* is “used to describe Paul's preaching, it is often in a context that permits audience participation in the discussion.” (Callaway 1963, 135)

Διαλέγομαι implies an interaction between speaker and hearer. The term provides the possibility for give and take. The speaker's words prompt questions in the minds of the audience. The listeners could verbalize their questions, allowing the speaker to clarify a point or debate a point. The presence of the dative pronoun *αὐτοῖς* with *διαλέγομαι* lends credence to an interactive understanding of the term *διαλέγομαι*. The NASV renders this combination, “reasoned with them.” Kemmler sees this usage as a comitative instrumental dative. The instrumental expresses the means by which an action is performed and the comitative expresses that the action is

⁺ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible, unless otherwise noted.

performed together with the subject (Kemmler 1975, 28). Hence, Paul reasoned (διελέξατο) with them, with the reasoning being completed by Paul and the Jews in the synagogue (αὐτοῖς). Paul needed the participation of the Jews in order to reason with them. The emphasis lies on the combined effort of the two parties in completing the action (Kemmler 1975, 29).

Synagogue Worship

The synagogue was an important center for religious activity by the time of Christ. The synagogue developed during the Babylonian exile. Separated from the Temple and the land, the Jewish people sought to worship God (Cavaletti 1990, 7). The synagogue offered a radically different form of religious practice. Temple worship focused on sacrifice. Synagogue worship focused on Torah study and prayer (Levine 1987, 7). After the exile, the synagogues continued as places of worship. In fact, despite the rebuilding of the Temple, synagogue worship increased in attendance and vitality after the exile (Cavaletti 1990, 7).

The synagogues were popular because they provided Jews with the opportunity to participate in worship. The synagogue, in contrast to the Temple, welcomed the presence of the congregation. In the synagogue, participation was possible. In the Temple, the people were observers (Levine 1987, 7). The synagogue allowed for the non-priestly class to participate in worship. Hence, the synagogue encouraged religious practices that penetrated into daily life (Cavaletti 1990, 7). The possibility of participation in synagogue worship extended to the sermons. Members of the congregation could ask questions of the speaker or add something to the finished sermon. It was not uncommon for the preacher to begin by receiving a question from the congregation concerning the day's Scripture reading (Osborn 1999, 112). The introductory question was labeled the *halakhic* question. Although the possibility exists that the *halakhic* question was staged, some evidence indicates that the questions were spontaneous (Shinan 1987, 103-104). For example, some preachers were unable to answer the questions that the audience posed (Heinemann and Petuchowski 1975, 110).

As would be expected, customs differed from community to community concerning synagogue worship. Generally, a brief sermon followed the Torah reading with the intent of explaining the meaning of the Torah. In some synagogues, the audience raised questions after the sermon was completed and the speaker immediately responded to those questions (Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching, s.v. "Jewish Preaching"). In general, Jewish worship in the synagogue provided the possibility for a greater degree of participation from the congregation than would have been expected at the Temple or during the Prophetic period.

Persuasion

Acts 17:4 reveals that Paul persuaded many of the people. "And some of them were *persuaded* and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women." Some of the Jewish men in the synagogue, as well as Gentiles, and women were persuaded by Paul's message to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. The verb *πίθω* is rendered persuade in English translations. Louw and Nida report that *πίθω* involves convincing someone to change their beliefs and actions. In the events recorded in Acts 17, Paul interacted with the Thessalonians in order to affect a change in their lives. [He assumed that the](#)

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[people were capable of discerning and responding to truth](#) (Witherington 1998, 503). Paul [called](#) the people to make a [decision](#) concerning Jesus Christ (Thompson, 2000, 22). It is interesting to note that Thessalonica was not the only location where *διαλέγομαι* and *πείθω* are both used in reference to Paul preaching. Luke also employs the two terms to describe Paul's preaching in Corinth (Acts 18:4) and Ephesus (Acts 19:8).

Acts 17:3 reveals other linguistic clues to Paul's persuasive intent in Thessalonica. Paul engaged in dialogue so that he could explain (*διανοίγων*) and reason (*παρατιθέμενος*). Explaining involved finding contemporary meaning for the present audience (Wall 2002, 238). Reasoning involved bringing evidence to the forefront in order to convince with the implication of a scholar sifting through textual evidence to mount a persuasive case (Parsons and Culy 2003, 325). The use of reasoning and proof reveals the apostle's careful concern for the hearers' questions and doubts (Longenecker 1981, 469). The [two](#) terms also reveal the apostle's underlying motivation [for engaging the congregation in dialogue](#), persuading them to recognize Jesus as Messiah (Witherington 1998, 505). The persuasive nature of Paul's interaction with the Thessalonians is evidenced in Paul's own writing. In 1 Thess 2:3, Paul speaks of his "appeal" (*παράκλησις*) to the Thessalonians. The phrase is interpreted as an earnest request, with an emphasis on the word's persuasive intent (Malherbe 2000, 139).

Conclusions from Acts 17:1-4

Paul's interactive discussion with the Thessalonians served the specific purpose of persuasion. The dialogue did not lack direction. Given the opportunity to speak, Paul employed all available resources in order to direct the people towards a decision. The terms *διαλέγομαι* and *πείθω* reveal that Paul's interacted with the Thessalonians at the synagogue in order to convince them that Jesus was the Christ. Oster described *διαλέγομαι* in Acts this way, "Luke's usage of *dialegomai* conveys not the picture of a quarrelsome attitude or irate apostle in the midst of a debate or abusive attack on opponents. Rather, it depicts one setting forth religious or sermonic points in the hope of converting. In substance, this term *dialegomai* was synonymous with teaching and reasoning." (Oster 1979, 57) Paul engaged in interactive conversation with the Jewish people of Thessalonica with the purpose of persuading them to accept that Jesus was the Messiah.

Contemporary Proponents of Dialogue

As noted in the introduction to this paper, an interest in interaction between pulpit and pew exists in contemporary homiletics. Often, this interest seeks to separate dialogue and persuasion. The views of McClure, Rose, and Pagitt are now presented and analyzed based on Paul's practices described in Acts 17:1-4.

John S. McClure

In his 1995 book, *The Round-table Pulpit*, John S. McClure argues for an alternative to "sovereign preaching," which he describes as hierarchical, assertive, and defensive. His proposal is a round-table pulpit in which the preacher assumes the role of a host with the entire

congregation having equal voice in the conversation (McClure 1995, 30-52). McClure's method seeks the input of the congregation through a collaborative brainstorming session composed of diverse members of the congregation that meets weekly (McClure 1995, 59-72). In McClure's method, the conversation in the brainstorming session becomes the sermon. In McClure's words, "the collaborative sermon must both describe and imitate in the pulpit the collaborative process of sermon brainstorming that took place in the sermon roundtable." (McClure 1995, 57) According to McClure, the content of the preacher's sermon cannot stray from the collaborative discussion. In McClure's round-table pulpit, the preacher becomes a passive participant in the development of the sermon. The empowered listeners drive the content of the message. In order to better understand McClure's purpose in preaching, his views concerning persuasion should be considered.

McClure recognizes that preaching is persuasive. However, McClure fears that persuasion too easily becomes manipulation or coercion. To protect against these potential hazards, McClure asserts that persuasion is a two-way street. He asserts, "Persuasion is not an action on someone but an action with someone." (McClure 1995, 25) McClure sees his collaborative approach to sermon development as a participatory form of persuasion. When the sermon faithfully represents the brainstorming session, coercion and manipulation are avoided (McClure 1995, 56).

McClure's fears of manipulation and coercion are well founded. However, the method that he has developed to protect against coercion and manipulation opens the door to another potential problem, non-persuasive preaching. McClure claims that his roundtable method will not regress into empty chatter. He claims that something important is "on the table." (McClure 1995, 52) However, McClure does little to support this claim. It seems more likely that McClure's groups will produce non-persuasive and purposeless sermons. If the direction of the sermon is determined collaboratively, then the individuals in the small group could choose to overlook the areas of Scripture that directly confront them. In addition, group-think can prohibit groups from finding and articulating the challenges in Scripture. Finally, the emphasis on group interaction over biblical exegesis likely will lead groups to focus on anthropomorphic needs at the expense of theocentric themes.

The goal of McClure's roundtable preaching method is "to *engage in* and *influence* the ways that a congregation is 'talking itself into' becoming a Christian community." (McClure 1995, 50) McClure's preacher does not make sovereign declarations or lead people on inductive journeys that arrive at pre-determined goals. Instead, McClure's preacher collaborates with the congregation in the production of a message that faithfully represents the congregation's conversations (McClure 1995, 50). However, McClure does not clearly convey how a preacher who faithfully represents a congregation's conversations will ever actually induce the congregation to change. It seems that by following McClure's method a preacher will perpetuate the congregation's current status rather than confronting the congregation with the biblical example and calling.

Lucy Atkinson Rose

Emerging from the New Homiletic, and also influenced by feminist theology, Lucy Atkinson Rose, a student of Fred Craddock, proposes a conversational approach to preaching, in her 1997 book, *Sharing the Word*. Rose's conversational approach to preaching seeks to remove the distance between preacher and listener that she perceives in existing models of preaching. Rose desires to see preacher and listener stand together opposite "text, meaning, or mystery." (Rose 1997, 90) Rose elevates the listeners to co-creators of the sermon. In Rose's conversational homiletic, "Preaching's goal is to gather the community of faith together around the Word in order to foster and refocus its central conversations." (Rose 1997, 98) Congregational solidarity is a key component of Rose's proposal (Rose 1997, 93). Rose strives to include the marginal voices in her roundtable. She emphasizes the unity of the community over and above the experience of the individual (Rose 1997, 128, 99).

The communal nature of the church is important; however, Rose's emphasis on solidarity seems to prohibit her conversational homiletic from engaging in persuasion, the purpose of Paul's preaching. In fact, Rose states that conversational preaching fears persuasive language (Rose 1997, 110). On this point Rose diverges from McClure. Whereas McClure cautioned against manipulative and coercive uses of persuasion, Rose avoids persuasion altogether. In the first footnote of Rose's introduction, she confesses to being uncomfortable with McClure's use of the term due to the abuses of persuasion in previous generations. Rose's fear of persuasion distances her from Paul's dialogical preaching. Paul persuaded through dialogue (Acts 17:1-4, 1 Thess 2:3). Rose's dialogue avoids persuasion.

In place of persuasion, Rose implies that the gathered congregation should discover meaning together through conversation. Rose compares this process of mutual discovery to the art world. Some artists create to impart meaning, while others create art to reflect their own process of discovery and invite the viewer to participate in the discovery of meaning. Rose likens the preacher in her conversational model to the latter. The preacher reflects their own process of discovery and invites the reader to formulate their own interpretations. She asserts, "Meaning divorced from a fixed message, becomes multilayered and open." (Rose 1997, 113) Rose seeks and celebrates openness and multiple meaning. She encourages the use of evocative language to invite listeners to participate in the discovery of meaning (Rose 1997, 110). Rose says that "the preacher's personal meaning should never be imposed on the congregation, limiting the story to one meaning or application." (Rose 1997, 116) Again, Rose's multiple layers of meaning conflict with Paul's consistent message and persuasive purpose (Acts 17:1-4, 1 Thess 2:3). Paul did not communicate in order to create meaning, he communicated with the purpose of conveying meaning.

Doug Pagitt

Emerging Church thinker, Doug Pagitt, in his 2005 book, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, claims that preaching should be less of a monologue or a speech event. Pagitt refers to contemporary monologic forms of preaching with the derogatory label "speaching." He asserts that preaching should be interactive, with listeners making verbal contributions to the preaching event (Pagitt 2005, 1-54). Pagitt is disturbed by the traditional method of preaching which has a predetermined direction and purpose and presents one clear message (Pagitt 2005, 30, 52). Pagitt asserts that preaching should make room for multiple voices by refraining from making

truth-claims (Pagitt, 2005, 30, 137). Like Rose and Allen, who espouse tentative language from the pulpit, Pagitt encourages the use of provisional statements. He suggests that preachers qualify their remarks with statements like, “It seems to me” or “This is my take on it.” (Pagitt 2005, 200) In Pagitt’s model, a lack of biblical authority produces a lack of sermonic authority which precludes the pastor from persuasion. This conflicts with Paul’s model. The apostle spoke the message of Christ with confidence and boldness (Acts 18:4, Acts 19:8, 1 Thess 2:2). Even while employing dialogical methods, Paul spoke with the intent to persuade (Acts 17:1-4, 1 Thess 2:3).

Pagitt also rejects persuasion in the sermon because he fears the abuse of persuasion. Pagitt recalls a speaking event when he was convicted of using an emotional story to manipulate a group of teenagers (Pagitt 2005, 72-75). He recounts his own moment of discovery, “Knowingly manipulating the emotions of my hearers to get them to come to a predetermined conclusion felt like the very thing a pastor shouldn’t do. It felt like a violation of the human relationship.” (Pagitt 2005, 74) Of course, preaching should not be manipulative. However, as with Rose, should the potential for abuse negate the use of persuasion altogether? Paul’s use of dialogue and persuasion reveals that abuse is not inherent in persuasion.

Conclusion

Acts 17:1-4 indicates that Paul allowed the congregation to participate through verbal interaction. It appears that, on occasion, Paul’s hearers asked questions and were asked questions. In spite of this interactive approach, Paul communicated with the purpose of persuasion. The term $\pi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\theta\omega$ appears in Acts 17:1-4, indicating that Paul convinced Jews in Thessalonica to accept that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. [William Willimon](#) accurately asserts [that the preaching found in the book of Acts has, as one of its goals, a change of mind and life](#) (Willimon 1988, 167-168). Paul presented the facts of the gospel in a logical and forceful manner in order to convince the hearer and illicit commitment from them (Callaway 1963, 134). As the communicator commissioned by God, Paul had a responsibility to convince others of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Paul did not abdicate this responsibility to the audience.

Paul proclaimed the message of Christ in order to persuade. Paul’s purpose remained consistent when he employed dialogical techniques. As seen in the preceding analysis, most contemporary proponents of dialogue abandon persuasion. Drawing from postmodern tendencies they shrink from persuasion out of a fear that persuasion will be used in an unethical manner. Ironically, the stated opinions of listeners conflict with the practices of dialogical proponents. Two-thirds of the listeners interviewed by Mulligan, Turner-Sharazz, Willhelm, and Allen indicated that they believed teaching was a major purpose of preaching (Mulligan and others 2005, 7). In fact, many listeners expressed disdain for “sugar coated” sermons that failed to confront. A number of the listeners interviewed stated that confrontation in preaching is necessary to help them grow in faith (Mulligan and others 2005, 19). The contemporary proponents of dialogue see persuasion and dialogue as polar opposites that cannot be harmonized. This erroneous view denies the truth, exemplified by Paul, that dialogue and persuasion can, and should, be utilized together effectively. Donald Coggan provides insight into this issue, “To hint that there is a choice to be made, in this sophisticated age, between the ‘old’ method of proclamation and the ‘new’ method of dialogue is to face the preacher with a false antithesis which is to be scorned.

Let him have none of it! Let him opt for both!” (Coggan 1996, 29)

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