

Preaching and Heart-Level Hermeneutics

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Preaching is both indispensable and central to Christianity. When given the privilege of preaching, we participate in the glorious activity of God's self-communication. Augustine taught that "what the Bible speaks, God speaks." So preaching is an extension of a central reality of our faith – we have a God who speaks through His Word! Why does our God speak? Donald Coggan put it simply, "He speaks because he loves."

Some perceive homiletics (the "academic" term for the field of preaching) to be sanctified rhetoric, a matter of mere technique. In reality, the "technique" aspects of preaching need to build on a solid foundation of the hermeneutics and the spirituality of the preacher.

In 1948, Andrew Blackwood stated that, "Pastors everywhere are becoming concerned about expository preaching." It would be easy to observe that such an interest in expository preaching in the post-war years has surely faded considerably since. While this is true, there does seem to be a reviving interest in "expository preaching" in recent years. Perhaps this is only in my experience (or in my dreams!) since I am so involved in preaching seminars and the like, but it does seem like there are new academic programs starting, journals being launched, websites born, special events for preachers convened, and so on.

Why is there such an interest in preaching? Let me suggest two reasons.

Reason 1 – Because so much contemporary preaching lacks biblical substance

The first, and easier, answer to this question typically involves pointing the finger at others. Many are pointing out that the church generally (usually that means everywhere but our own church!) is in the grip of an epidemic of Diet Sermons with all the nutritional value of Diet Sodas. Perhaps motivated by the demands of a consumerist culture, or the notion that contemporary listeners are incapable of concentration beyond a few minutes at a time (consider MTV to support this claim, but ignore the lengthening Hollywood movies since that undermines the point), many churches have moved to purely practical how-to messages giving helpful tips for life. The fruit of this change may be bulging pews, but shriveling souls, as biblical illiteracy sweeps the contemporary church scene.

There is certainly truth in the critique of such Preaching Lite that pervades much of evangelical Christendom today, but there is another reason for an increasing interest in preaching.

Reason 2 – Because so much biblically substantive preaching lacks spiritual power

J.I.Packer suggests that the reason for such an interest in preaching lies in a deeply troubling sense that we do not know how to revive the powerful preaching of Whitefield, Wesley, Simeon and others. "We feel that, for all our efforts, we as preachers are failing to speak adequately to men's souls."

Do we indeed have a deep dissatisfaction with our own ministry? We try to compete with the world, but often do not sense that hearts are truly won, nor that genuine peace and joy result in the spirits of those listening. We give much, but do we really give much of God or a genuine confidence in Christ?

I would like to suggest two moves that need to take place in our understanding of preaching.

Move 1 – From Diet Bible Sermonettes to Well-Informed Biblical Exposition

The first move that is needed is a shift in focus. A shift from preaching well-crafted lists of tips for life, to genuinely understanding and then applying the Bible to our lives (or even applying our lives to the Bible). This is fundamentally a hermeneutics issue. After all, preaching involves the fruit of the preacher's hermeneutics communicated to the community. Instead of combing the text seeking departure points for our own gems of practical wisdom, we need to give ourselves to the joyful agony of wrestling with the text, allowing the text to wrestle with us. We must not rest until we can speak with humble confidence that what we speak are not our words superimposed on a passage, but God speaking from His Word. True expository preaching involves letting the Word of God be the master of that which is said.

True exposition should not be boring, for we would not want to give the impression that God gives of Himself in self-revelation in a way that is boring. True exposition should not be disconnected from real life, for in the incarnation we see God giving of Himself, His ultimate self-revelation, in the most relevant manner imaginable. Perhaps if more preachers would truly grasp the need for effective hermeneutics in their sermon preparation, perhaps then we would not have so much occasion to point the finger at others and complain of dumbed-down diet sermonettes abounding in our generation.

However, answering the first reason for contemporary interest in preaching (the failure of others), doesn't address our own feelings of failure. What if our well-trained orthodox evangelical hermeneutics are not resulting in sermons that genuinely feed the soul, win hearts, give peace and joy in the spirit? What if our technically right hermeneutics do not result in giving much of God or genuine confidence in Christ? The fact is that there are many preachers today who do not fall into the Diet Sermon category, and yet something is still missing. With "good understanding" of the text many are still tending toward pragmatics, dogmatics and duty-driven responsibility. This is not what we long for in our ministry.

So we progress to the second move, perhaps addressing the issue with our own preaching.

Move 2 – From Well-Informed Biblical Exposition to Heart-Level Biblical Exposition

The first move highlighted the need for effective biblical study by means of well-informed hermeneutics. Yet how is it that the best hermeneutics that the academy can offer fails to guarantee good results? Obviously preaching is much more than the fruit of hermeneutics on show, but rather than moving on to speak of gifting, anointing, etc., I'd like to push the hermeneutics issue a bit deeper. Michael Quicke notes that churches are suffering from one-dimensional engagement with Scripture: either just with the head or just with the heart. As a result, "The two edged sword becomes a plastic butter knife." On the contrary, we need to engage the Bible with the head and the heart.

Perhaps the best hermeneutical training on offer in our seminaries and Bible schools is lacking something? Perhaps a combination of a pervasive stoic influence, a cold-and-distant-God theology and a duty-driven spirituality so pervades our Christian thinking and practice that we view everything through coloured lenses – evidently not rose-tinted ones? I do not reject academics. I affirm the importance of good learning in the areas of hermeneutics and biblical studies. I believe our skill in Bible study and sermon preparation should be informed by the best that the academy has to offer. But we should not be blinded by an intellectual arrogance that suggests an informed will is all that is

required for, or even offered by, a biblical spirituality.

Just as move 1 amounted to improving the hermeneutics underlying preaching, so also move 2 calls on us to improve our hermeneutics. The weakness in much of the hermeneutics taught today is that it amounts to heady exegesis that misses the heart-level revelation of God in His Word. Genuine exegesis cannot, and must not, be divorced from spirituality. Indeed, true spirituality demands careful exegesis. The nature of Scripture is that it is God's self-giving, self-revelation, through which we are privileged to know Him. This knowledge is not mere mental classification, but heart-level relationship.

So in order to preach the Word in such a way that hearts are won, souls are fed, and our listeners receive much of God and genuine confidence in Christ, we must do more than study the Bible merely to the point of intellectual understanding. We must engage with God as we seek to both understand, and be transformed by, His self-giving through the Word. We must engage with Him through a more complete hermeneutic, and then present the fruit of our "study" in a manner that goes deeper:

Our preaching must go deeper than the conduct of our listeners (either through practical tips for life, or duty-driven guilt-pressed responsibility). Our preaching must go deeper than the beliefs and brains of our listeners (through intellectual information transfer, seeking to inform the mind that informs the will of our listeners). Our preaching must go deep enough to touch the affections of our listeners (hearts touched that then give values to the mental processing faculties, and thus determine their conduct in everyday life).

We need preaching that touches the affections. This is critical. But how do we achieve "affective preaching?" Let's consider two possible solutions:

Solution 1 - Adding "affective" to our preaching through classical rhetoric

A typical solution is to seek to introduce an emotive element at the level of content and delivery. Some may simply introduce engaging, entertaining or emotional content in the form of "illustrations." Others may unleash some passion in delivery since passion and enthusiasm are known to be contagious. Still others may strategize rhetorically, looking to classical rhetoric for that aspect that goes beyond presentation to persuasion, which is the core issue in classical rhetoric. Perhaps a good old "peroratio" is key? That is, the final appeal to the emotions designed to cement consent to that which has been presented. Whether the latin language of classical rhetoric is known or not, many preachers seek to introduce the critical affective element into preaching by means of that final applicational appeal – a tear-jerker of a story, an impassioned plea, or just a plain-old guilt trip!

Defaulting to classical rhetoric is not the only solution. In fact, it can be a problematic solution. Saint Augustine was a trained expert in the art of rhetoric. He knew the power of speech and its capacity to do harm when separated from the goodness of God's truth. He looked back on his earlier work in the realm of rhetoric as a dishonest pursuit, a peddling in "crafty tricks." How easily a desire to communicate effectively can slide into a contemporized form of rhetoric that depends on the skill, charisma and technique of the preacher, rather than on the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul also had concerns with a classical rhetorical approach to persuasion in preaching. Duane Litfin has studied Paul's teaching in 1st Corinthians 1-4 at length. He contends that Paul is distancing his own preaching ministry from the public speaking of the classic orators, the public entertainers of that era. Paul identifies his ministry with that of the herald, as opposed to the

rhetorician/orator. Many would suggest that his focus is on content alone – the foolishness of the kerygma (defined as just the content of the gospel). Litfin makes a very strong case that for Paul, being a herald involved a distinction in form as well as content. The effectiveness of the communication was ultimately not determined by the convincing content and irresistible technique of the speaker, but by God’s using the “foolishness” of both the content and the form in the presentation of His Word. As Litfin puts it, “Faith, if we are thinking in biblical terms, means taking God at his word, and when it comes to the gospel, that word is all he is inclined to give us.”

Looking to “add something for the affections” is not the solution to affectively weak preaching. While it may be tempting to borrow from the skills of classical or contemporary rhetoric, this solution amounts to a masking of the real problem, rather than offering a genuine solution.

Solution 2 – Being “affectively” aware in our Bible study so that we then represent an affectively attractive sacred rhetoric

If classical rhetoric does not provide the solution for the problem of affective preaching, perhaps the answer lies in what Michael Pasquarello calls Sacred Rhetoric. Instead of somehow introducing the affective element into the preaching event as an extrinsic addendum, genuinely affective hermeneutics will recognize the affective nature of Scripture itself. Thus, the task of the preacher is not to skillfully manipulate affections by technique in preaching or a worked-up passion in presentation, but merely to act as a herald, a presenter of that which is there in the Word – the source of the message he brings.

A heart-to-heart engagement with God through His Word, an affective hermeneutic, will provide a far more genuine form of affective preaching. Affective elements are not somehow added in, but are genuinely there in the message, and hopefully, in the messenger too. As Harrison wrote in *Augustine*, “Love is the hermeneutical principle of Scripture . . . God has chosen to motivate man’s fallen will to the true and good through the delight occasioned by His beautiful revelation of Himself – and this includes, centrally, Scripture and preaching.”

Pasquarello writes of “the divine artistry inscribed in the scriptural narrative” and says of its power that it “delights, captivates, and persuades us, rather than teaching us something (since knowledge puffs up), of the divine generosity and goodness that is creation’s source and end.” In the Bible we have “God’s truth and goodness, expressed in an abundance and excess of self-giving love.”

Conclusion

The field of homiletics can, and must, teach methodology and “how to.” Yet, this must be integrated with genuine spirituality, for the central calling of preachers is to be listeners to God’s Word, prayerfully attentive to God’s self-revelation in His Word and communicators of that divine devotion to the community of God’s people. Ultimately, preaching looks beyond content and form to an “activity of the Triune God, who speaks.” This is why this article on preaching has the dual focus on hermeneutics and spirituality.

True preaching preaches from the heart of God to the heart of humanity. All who preach need to pursue further the true role of the heart in preaching: God’s heart in His self-revelation, our engagement with His heart in our study and preparation, and the effective contagious presentation of that relationality in our preaching to the hearts of His people.

As Pasquarello puts it, “When situated within this Trinitarian vision, preaching is a form of graced participation in God’s expression of himself in the Word, an inspired witness of praise through which God the Father lovingly communicates himself in the abundant generosity and joy of self-giving.”

Much of the preaching in evangelical pulpits today would be strengthened by greater attention to the hermeneutics used in sermon preparation. However, having accurate understanding is not enough, if somehow that “accuracy” is missing the heart of the God who gives Himself through His Word.

Most will agree that effective preaching must touch the heart as well as the head. But how are we to preach “affectively?” The solution is not found in the techniques of rhetoric, ancient or modern. The solution is essentially a spirituality/hermeneutical solution. We are not to make the message touch the hearts, we are to effectively understand and then present the Word of God which itself touches hearts. Pasquarello again, “The Word itself is invested with the character of rhetoric or persuasion. It appears to the eye as beauty, as possessing a certain splendor, as an intrinsic, luminous, graceful style that attracts and kindles love of love itself.” Or better, of Love Himself.

Affective preaching is not about rejecting all rhetoric, but recognizing the beauty and power of the revealed divine rhetoric that is Scripture. When we preach Scripture well, His self-giving love and beautiful wisdom will do the persuading, not our technique. Indeed, homiletics is not a field focused on technique. It is primarily a matter of spiritual hermeneutics – of participating in the loving self-revelation of a God who gives of Himself through His Word. When we are gripped by that truth, then perhaps we will preach in such a way that listeners can taste and see that the Lord is good. Perhaps then the words of Humphrey Mills at hearing the preaching of Richard Sibbes will be echoed in the church today. After giving himself to the duty-bound “spirituality” found in the sermons of other preachers, Mills wrote:

“But yet I was distracted in my mind, wounded in conscience, and wept often and bitterly, and prayed earnestly, but yet had no comfort, till I heard that sweet saint . . . Doctor Sibbs, by whose means and ministry I was brought to peace and joy in my spirit. His sweet soul-melting Gospel-sermons won my heart and refreshed me much, for by him I saw and had much of God and was confident in Christ, and could overlook the world. . . . My heart held firm and resolved and my desires all heaven-ward.”

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