

## **Book Review: *Preaching*, by Fred B. Craddock**

I wish that I had read *Preaching* ten years ago; it would have been helpful in giving my messages a better focus. *Preaching* magazine listed it as the fourth most influential book on preaching in the last 25 years.<sup>1</sup> Although it was published 28 years ago, it is still being printed in its original text. In this review I will discuss the contents of the book and highlight areas that I found particularly helpful.

### **What is preaching?**

Craddock seems reluctant to define the task. “We all know and yet none of us seems to know what preaching is.”<sup>2</sup> It’s difficult to difficult to define, for it is determined by the situation, the message, and the manner. It is socially constructed and situated, and different people go about it in different ways. “There is, of course, no one way everyone is to preach” (21). We can learn from all sorts of speakers, “but not one of them is to be copied” (20). In a short word-picture he adds, “David cannot fight in Saul’s armor.” This is characteristic of the one-line gems scattered throughout the book; they add zest to the reading. It also illustrates his point that speakers should not destroy the effectiveness of a metaphor by explaining it too much. Let the listener or the reader have the joy of discovering it on their own. “Being as obvious as high noon

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Dudit, “The 25 Most Influential Preaching Books of the Past 25 Years,” *Preaching*, 2010. <http://www.preaching.com/resources/articles/11625882/page-2/>. Accessed 5 February 2013. The rankings were based on a survey of the readers of the magazine, most of whom are evangelical.

<sup>2</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all quotes are from Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1985). Here, page 17.

at every point is demeaning” (195).

In one sense, preaching begins with the preacher – the person must have credibility. “The person of the preacher is a vital element in effective preaching” (22). Someone known to be a liar and a cheat is not going to convey the message well. “The minister works within an unusual network of trust and intimacy that makes the separation of character from performance impossible” (23).

Craddock states the purpose of a sermon by asking, “Does the sermon say and do what the biblical text says and does? This question functions as the canon for ascertaining if a sermon brings the text forward as a living voice in the church” (28). The biblical text, and the sermon, is not just information – it has a purpose beyond simply giving information. It calls for a response. Although Craddock does not mention it, this is echoed in contemporary speech-act theory, which notes that words are performative. People have a purpose in speaking; they want their words to *do* something, often by having the listeners respond in some way. For example, Romans 2 and 3 emphasize that everyone has sinned. But to faithfully preach from such a text, we must also ask what this information was supposed to *do* for the readers. Was it supposed to correct people who thought they were sinless, to let people know that it was permissible to stay in their sins, to give them hope of becoming sinless, or was it a foil for demonstrating the universal need for the gospel of Jesus Christ? The very same sentence can be true in one context and false in another; a word that brings encouragement in one context may be discouraging in another. To be faithful to Scripture, we must consider the purpose, not just the words.

Craddock notes that God does not speak with a loudspeaker, or in such a way that he will be obvious to all. We are to speak boldly, yet realize that not everyone will respond in the way that we would like, no matter what volume we use, or how good our logic is.

If a person recognizes in the sermon issues of ultimate importance, if embracing the message will affect relationships, uses of one's influence and resources, and perspectives on ethical and moral questions, if believing means entering into covenant with God and the community of faith, then, of course, there is resistance. Does not the patient on the operating table have the right to ask, "Doctor, what will I look like after the surgery?" Petty sermons and promotional pieces arouse no resistance. (65)

The chapter on "The Life of Study" encourages preachers to dig deeper reservoirs. "When the life of study is confined to 'getting up sermons,' very likely those sermons are undernourished. They are the sermons of a preacher with the mind of a consumer, not a producer" (69). He notes that many ministers are too willing to let parishioners set the schedule; the pastor wishes to be "responsive" to the needs of the people but ends up giving them all a poor diet because of distractions created by a minority. The pastor must remember that "working in the study *is* being among the flock" (72). Time in the study is for the benefit of all the people. Craddock encourages the study not only of biblical materials, but good literature that helps us use language more effectively (79).

Preachers should not only discern the message of the text, but also the need of the congregation. "There are two focuses and the distance between them. One focus is upon the listeners, including their contexts: personal, domestic, social, political, economic. The other is upon the biblical text, including its contexts: historical, theological, and literary" (85). What do most people want? "They want some insight. Perhaps looking at their lives, their marriages, their studies, their jobs, their world through the lens of Scripture and theology, a fresh perspective can be found" (89). But they do not need commands or condescension – they need to be given a choice that they can make for themselves and will therefore own for themselves.

Preachers must also listen to the biblical text. This does not mean quantity, but quality. "Sermons that carry a heavy load of passages from Genesis to Revelation often are only the

result of the preacher's being seduced by the concordance.... Not one of the passages cited was investigated in a serious effort to listen to it" (100). That is a good description of many of the sermons I heard three decades ago.

One small area of disagreement I had with Craddock came when he said that preachers should "establish" the text – that is, if there are variants in the ancient Greek texts, to decide which is most likely to be authentic (107-110). Most preachers, even those who know Greek, are ill-prepared to enter this discussion, and it usually has meager results for the time it takes. Craddock is right that preachers should be *aware* of textual variants the parishioners may have in their laps, but these can be seen in the footnotes of several modern translations. If there are important textual variants, the preacher's time is probably better spent on the undisputed text; that is usually an adequate basis for a sermon without trying to argue a disputable point against what some parishioners see printed in their own Bibles.

I agree with Craddock's next step, however: to determine "the parameters of the text." This involves a look at the literary flow of the text, with consideration for the quantity that can be addressed in the time allotted for the sermon. It is only after the preacher has studied the text thoroughly, that "the preacher is now ready to enter into fruitful conversation with the writers of commentaries." It is only after we have done our own homework, that we then ready to enter the discussion with those who have studied the text before us. But we do not abdicate our role to the commentators: "As pastor, teacher, and preacher, the minister can neither avoid the role of interpreter nor leave it to 'the experts.' As the interpreter of Scripture for a particular group of parishioners, the minister *is* the expert" (129).

The preacher may choose to disagree with the commentary – indeed, commentators do not always agree with each other. We might initially think that this diversity is a bad thing, but

Craddock points out an advantage: “That these scholars of the church do not always agree with one another is not a flaw in the fabric of the faith, but rather it invigorates, teasing the whole church into active thought, preventing the oppression of a single perspective” (135). I shudder to think of what the church might be like if the only permissible interpretations were those of Augustine and Aquinas! I am glad that scholars are able to present dissenting voices, even if some of them later turn out to be wrong.

Most passages touch on several topics, and the preacher need not address them all. One angle can be used this year, another angle next year. Giving multiple perspectives in the same sermon can confuse the listeners. It is more effective to focus on one point at a time. For example, in Philippians 2, “the preacher must decide to preach Christology *or* preach Christian attitude and conduct based on that Christology” (119). We need to consider what will be more helpful to the congregation at the time. “That many texts hold a surplus of meaning is true, but not everything can be said at once. There will be occasions to return to these passages again and again” (156). In order to communicate a clear message, we need a clear focus.

“We do not interpret Scripture; we interpret Scripture *for someone somewhere*” (136). We are asking, how does this text apply to this group of people at this particular time in their journey together? Sometimes the modern situation will be quite similar to the ancient one, and the text may be preached much as it first was. At other times, we may need to adapt it. If we are preaching about the prayer of the Pharisee and the tax collector, for example, we may need to address a problem of role reversal: we may be preaching to tax collectors “who thank God they are not as the ‘Pharisees’” (143). We should not give a word of assurance to the presumptuous, because “we can misquote by changing listeners” (144).

In the last part of the book, Craddock turns his attention to the mechanics of creating the

sermon. The first step “is the statement of the message in a simple, affirmative sentence” (155).<sup>3</sup> Do not overload the sentence with subordinate clauses – just clearly state one point.

Craddock observes, “The goal is not to get something said but to get something *heard*” (167). We must therefore speak in such a way as to help people hear – not just that they stay awake, but that they are actively engaged with the sermon, and responding to it. One technique for this is to “design sermons which create expectation with their early promise, but which will delay the fulfillment of that promise until the listener is sufficiently engaged to own the message and take responsibility for what is heard” (166). Don’t give them the conclusion at the beginning.

The form or the structure of sermons should vary with the content. “No form is so good that it does not eventually become wearisome to both listener and speaker” (177). Another advantage of variety is that it does not stereotype the faith. “Ministers who, week after week, frame their sermons as arguments, syllogisms armed for debate, tend to give that form to the faith perspective of regular listeners. Being a Christian is proving you are right” (173). The form should serve the purpose: “What has to be done in order to get this message heard?” (182).

Craddock spoke to my own preference for using a manuscript. “Many preachers—and some very effective ones, too—will protest, ‘I always write my sermons in full. I was so taught and would be a rambling babbler without it’” (191). Craddock does not object to this practice—if (and this is a big if) “every written word [is] servant of the spoken word” (191). It must be designed for an oral message.

There is much more in the book that is commendable and helpful, but I cannot repeat it all here; I encourage all preachers to read the book for themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> This is similar to Haddon Robinson’s “big idea” (*Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001], 33-46).

