

## Principles and Practices of Preaching

### What is preaching?

Preaching is the art of communicating God's word to encourage, exhort, and correct (2 Tim. 4:2). It is generally based on Scripture, although in some cases its basis may be hidden (e.g., Acts 17:22-29). The ultimate goal of preaching is to join Jesus in his ministry of bringing people into sharing the fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit. As part of that goal, preaching should help people have faith in Christ, and to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2). It should present the gospel of what Christ has done for us, and how he wants us to respond to his grace. It should help them receive biblical information and exhortations, and implement them in their lives. It should address their spiritual needs, including those they did not know they had.

Preaching is not a form of entertainment, although it may sometimes be entertaining as a means to its primary purpose. It should not be boring, for that would hinder its purpose. It may address contemporary issues, but preaching should also address issues that contemporary society tends to overlook. There are two primary ways to let Scripture be the basis for the topics of our sermons: either to follow the lectionary cycle, or to systematically preach through biblical books. I favor the latter approach, since it allows both preacher and parishioners to pay more attention to the context in which the words were originally given.<sup>1</sup> When a contemporary issue is so pressing

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<sup>1</sup> One potential problem with this approach is that some preachers take five years to get through a book, which means that people in the audience may receive only a narrow slice of biblical teachings before they move to another city. Preachers who can get five sermons out of one verse may be viewed as superb preachers, and perhaps they are, but they are giving the congregation very small servings of gourmet food. The ratio of human words to biblical words is very high. At least for me, I find that ten verses of Scripture is usually a better basis for a sermon, and it enables the preacher to explain more of the Bible each year. It also forces the

that everyone in the congregation is thinking about it anyway (for example, a recent tragedy in the congregation, community, nation or world), then the expository cycle may be interrupted and the congregation's concerns can make them more receptive to what God's word may be for them in such a situation. Neither lectionary nor expository preaching seems to be the pattern found in the New Testament – preaching should be driven by its primary purpose, not an advance commitment to a particular format or cycle.

## **Principles**

What are the primary principles we need to remember as we prepare sermons?

First, that we are the messengers, not the creators of the message or the focus of the message. Creativity is involved – in our desire for effectiveness, we may seek new ways of delivering an old message; we seek creative intersections of Scripture and society; we seek to make the message faithful to the original, but always new. Despite the importance of our creativity, we strive to deliver a message from God, not from ourselves. We need to accurately convey what Scripture itself teaches, and beware the human tendency to read our own ideas into the text. Homiletics starts with hermeneutics. We need to discern principles *in the text*, and discern how they apply today. Prayer, and sensitivity to the Spirit, is part of preparation.

In our messages, we need to point people to God, not to ourselves as indispensable mediators. We do not want parishioners to think, “I could never have gotten that out of the Bible on my own. I might as well not try. My spiritual growth is dependent on the pastor.” Rather, we want people to think, “If I think about Scripture in depth, I could understand it better, just as the pastor does. I’ll do my best, but I am also glad that we have a pastor, and I want to be enriched

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preacher to focus on what is most important, rather than exhaustively pursuing every detail.

by the blessings God gives the pastor.” We want to present God’s truth as accessible, not as exclusive to trained professionals. Good preaching is good for the church, but ironically, the better the oratory skills of the preacher, the more danger there is that people will be attracted for the wrong reasons. Good preachers should help people see beyond the messenger, so that they are following Jesus, not the preacher.

Second, the authority of the message comes from God, not from the speaker. The preacher speaks not as one who is above the congregation, but as *part* of the congregation – the message speaks to the preacher as well as to the others. God may speak to the preacher primarily during preparation rather than the delivery of the sermon, but the preacher should still acknowledge being under the authority of the word of God, rather than one who wields its authority over others. Even when preachers are personally innocent of a specific fault, they must acknowledge that they are human, struggling with other issues. Like Jesus, we are able to empathize with human weakness, for we are also tempted in every way – and unlike Jesus, we sin (cf. Heb. 4:15).

Third, preaching should remind people of what God has done. It is not a report of our search for divine light, but rather a report of how God is speaking to us, revealing to us the goodness and grace of God. Preaching should reflect God’s supreme self-revelation in the form of Jesus Christ. What he said and what he did show us what God is like, and it shows us the nature of the divine life for which we were created and for which we were redeemed. We need to remind people of what he has done, and encourage them to trust in him for their salvation and sanctification. The God who did not spare his own Son can be counted on to provide all that we need for the completion of our transformation (Rom. 5:10; Phil. 1:6). Every sermon should include the gospel.

Fourth, the sermon is not just information, but a catalyst for transformation. We want the message to have results in people's lives – bringing about the full range of biblical responses: faith, repentance, obedience, love, joy, humility, etc. We let Scripture set the agenda for what the expected response might be, and we respond to Scripture by faithfully repeating its explicit and implicit exhortations. As Fred Craddock says, we must not only report what Scripture says – a sermon must also *do* what Scripture is intended to do.

Fifth, the messages should be theologically accurate. We do not want to invent or perpetuate errors. We acknowledge the inability of human language to fully describe God, but we also acknowledge that God uses human language as a means of self-revelation. We strive to use human language as best as we can, being attentive to the nuances of words (which are always changing), the ways in which our words might be misunderstood, and clarifying what we mean as well as what we do not mean. We do not merely repeat the words of Scripture<sup>2</sup> (even unbelievers could do that), but we seek to put them into other words to expand or limit what is meant. Theology helps shape the parameters of our paraphrase.

Sixth, preachers need to know the audience. We not only need to know the content of our message, we also need to know how it intersects the lives of the people who are listening to us. We need to show how the passage is relevant to their needs. (We do not *make* it relevant – it already *is* relevant, so we need to discern *how* it is, and explain how it is.) There are occasions when we are a guest speaker and do not know our audience well, and must therefore be more general in what we say (this is even more true when we are speaking in another culture), but ideally we should be aware of what's going on in the lives of our brothers and sisters in the faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Those words originated as a translation of a divine concept into Greek, and for most of our parishioners, they are a human translation of the Greek into English.

In this regard, small churches should do better than large churches, and certainly better than a mass-media ministry in which the message must be even more generalized. We need to know the crises and triumphs of the congregation, their fears and (sometimes) an excess of confidence in their own abilities. We need to know the audience so that we might know when to emphasize God's faithfulness to us (e.g. Rom. 8:31-39) and when to emphasize our need for response (e.g., Rom. 11:19-21).

Last, we need to know when to stop preaching, and by that I do not just mean ending the worship services on time. "Preaching" should not be our primary means of communication with members, spouses, children, and neighbors. We are not perpetual fountains of good advice, nor are we always speaking with divine authority on every topic that comes up. When we step out of the pulpit, we step into a different role in the congregation. People may still look up to us as authorities (and hopefully we *do* have some earned authority – that is why we are asked to speak in the first place), but we do not always have the same authority as when we are delivering a message that is intentionally researched, thought out and structured to be a cultural transposition of God's word into our own situation. We need humility from start to finish, and we should not think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Rom. 12:3).

### **Putting it into practice**

What are the mechanics of sermon structure and delivery?

A sermon's structure should serve its purpose, that of helping us be transformed into the image of Christ. There is no divinely mandated sermon structure; that is to some extent shaped by the subject matter and the rhetorical customs of the day, which shape what the audience expects to hear. The style used in an Episcopal church would not be very effective for a

Pentecostal audience, and vice versa. This is part of what it means to know the audience. Some audiences expect illustrations from contemporary movies; others from articles in *Atlantic* magazine. Some expect sermon points to be supported with philosophy and logic; others expect personal anecdotes. Most audiences are flexible, but the more we make them flex, the more we need to compensate in other areas. Our understanding of the *ethos* of the audience can help us put our message into a format that will make it easier for them to receive the message.

Nevertheless, there are times to use an unexpected format, if this serves the communicative purpose. If the scripture passage is normally at the beginning of the message, there may be occasions or topics in which it might be rhetorically more effective to delay it. Or the speaker may wish to dress in costume and speak as a biblical character in order to make a particular point. The purpose is not to draw attention to the speaker or the technique, but it should always serve the communicative purpose.

Some preachers begin with a reading of the entire passage of scripture they wish to exposit (this is common in churches that use the lectionary), and the sermon proceeds on that foundation. My own preference is that I read one or two verses and explain them, then one or two more, with my comments alternating with scripture. This format works particularly well when the verses are displayed on our screen – we proceed through the text in short segments at a time, commenting on historical background, word meanings, and application as relevant to each verse. However, I recognize that this is just a personal preference, perhaps a temporary one, and I am happy for other preachers to approach the task in different ways.

I speak from a manuscript. So have many preachers of the past, and so does the U.S. President. When I preach, I have something important to say, and I want to do the best that I can to ensure that I say it right. I may never look “cool” or “gifted,” but it is the format that works

best for me. I am more concerned with the message than with making the messenger look cool. I have found that when I do not have extensive notes, my nervousness causes me to fumble for words, choose wrong words, or even to skip sections I had planned. In such cases, the messenger is getting in the way of the message.

With repeated rehearsals of the sermon, I could probably do better, perhaps even speak without notes at all, but I think I have more productive things to do with my time. What?! Isn't preaching important, and the audience important? Sure, but so are the other tasks and audiences I have. There is a point of diminishing returns in sermon preparation, and this is one for me. I could be a *slightly* more effective speaker if I spent a *lot* more time practicing my delivery, but it comes at the cost of being less effective for my other audiences, such as family and employer. Those are important, too. Saying "yes" to one task means saying "no" to another. So I write my sermons word for word. Since I print the manuscript in large type, I am able to have frequent eye contact with the audience, and I have learned to vary my voice quality to convey natural feelings and emphases. With the "security" of the manuscript, I am also able to add unscripted thoughts without fear of losing my train of thought. The manuscript also enables me to estimate exactly how long the message will take: I speak at 140-145 words per minute.

Can we compete with TV? No. Television programs have huge budgets and large staffs, for content, audio, and visuals. The presenters of such programs have been selected as the best of the best – not just in the top 1 percent, but in the top .001 percent. It is simply not realistic for every church of a few hundred (or less) people to have preachers and programs in the top .001 percent. Nor is it realistic to expect that every preacher be as good as the televised preachers. We cannot compete on that basis, nor should we try. We are not entertainers, but messengers. We may not be in the top .001 percent when it comes to rhetorical gifts, and we need not get

depressed about it. But we should do the best we can, with the time God has given us, with the gifts he has given us, where he has placed us. Our job is to know what Scripture says, to know our audience, and to help one connect with the other, to facilitate the work that Jesus is doing in their lives. We should trust God to do the rest, and that does not necessarily mean popularity. Of course, it can hurt our feelings when some people would rather watch sit-com re-runs instead of listening to us preach, but their choice should not affect our sense of self-worth. Our goal is to be effective for those who do come.

### **Mistakes I have made**

I tend to focus on information rather than exhortation. When I was young, I read the encyclopedia; I enjoyed learning information even if there was no immediate application. The fact that I do not know who played in the Super Bowl or the World Series shows that I am seriously out of step with the general population. Most people do not seem to share my love of information. “Just give me the bottom line – tell me what I’m supposed to *do* with this.”

Some of my sermons have contained too much information. A small percentage of the congregation likes a lot of new information, but “information” is not a faithful re-presentation of God’s word to the people. Information may be part of the message, but it is not there for its own sake – it is the foundation for response from the people.

I have also been reluctant to exhort, partly through fear of legalism, partly through a desire to avoid confrontation. I may explain my conclusion and hope that other people accept the logic, but this is often too cognitive and lacking in emotion. I do not want to use emotion in a manipulative way, so I tend to not use it much. My “emotional intelligence” seems to be low, and I suspect that no amount of information will change that.

These deficiencies are not insurmountable – but they do require conscious compensatory

effort. I need more stories, more illustrations, more human interest, and to give more encouragement for people to adopt a practical application. Some of my sermons have done better at this than others have – and this sometimes reflects the amount of time that I had available for the preparation. I generally do better if I am able to prepare my manuscript well ahead of time, and let it sit for a while. I can then view it with new eyes (and hopefully with new ears, too) and improve it, especially for the auditory setting in which it will be given. My spouse is also a helpful critic. Although she doesn't know who played in the Super Bowl, either, she is in better touch with the average listener.

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It has been many years since I've been in a speech class or a speech club, but as I recall, I learned far more from the *experience* of speaking in those settings than I did from *information* that was given in those settings. Students with the gift of eloquence may have found the information more important than the experience, but *my* area of greatest learning was in the giving, not in the receiving. It is easy for me to receive information; it is far more difficult to implement it by speaking in public, and so that is where most of my growth has been.

I imagine that if I had taken a seminary-level homiletics course 20 years ago, I would have read a couple of books and given two or three sermons in front of my peers, who could have pointed out numerous “areas for improvement.” That would have decreased my confidence and my willingness to speak. But the path I took, although far slower, gave me far more than a homiletics course could. I therefore think that I may be given credit for prior learning in the area of homiletics. This does not mean that I have mastered the art of preaching; I still have much to learn. I could benefit from a course in advanced homiletics, for example, but I do not think I would get much out of an introductory homiletics course.