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# A Hermeneutic for Preaching

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Central to the life of Christians down through the ages has been the proclamation of the Gospel. The biblical record calls for such preaching and highlights the importance of this activity. We see this in the recounting of significant preaching events in the life of Jesus, Paul, and the disciples. Moreover, within most Christian traditions the definition of ordained ministry is itself tied to this proclaiming of the Word. Even further, within the Lutheran Reformation tradition the church itself is understood to be "... the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel."<sup>1</sup>

In light of this, there can be no doubt about the importance of the preaching task. However, the way in which a preacher best fulfils this task has been often the focus of much discussion. Most preachers would agree that if the Gospel is to be proclaimed to persons in a particular time and place, then preaching must pay serious attention both to the content of the Gospel as presented in the Scriptures and church tradition, and to the historical context of those one is addressing. In this way the two essential elements for preaching are seen to be attended to and opportunity is created for vividly and transformatively proclaiming God's action in history. However, beyond this agreement the question remains as to just how the relation between these two elements is to be understood. What is the proper relation of God's revealed Word and the lived-world history of reason and culture? What is the relation between the Scriptures (the biblical text and its historical context) and the current historical context of the listeners through which God is working and to which the Word of

God is addressed? Preachers have over the years answered this question in a variety of ways, and the ways they have answered have had a direct bearing on the ways they have preached.

Some have seen this relationship as one of opposition. Such preachers view culture as only reflecting the sinful results of a fallen human nature. For them culture is seen to be “secular” (and not in any way “sacred”), and thereby providing ample illustrations of what Christians are to oppose. By way of contrast, Scripture is found to reveal to Christians the true signs of God’s justice and mercy through the “Law of Love”. The Law of Love is given as the Christian alternative to any human forms of social justice in the culture. Of course, because this comes only through sacred revelation, one would find the presence of this Law of Love only within the holy community of the faithful Christian church. Preaching is therefore called on to expose the sinful nature of the culture, and to help the community better understand the will of God for Christians within the Christian community of the church. In this approach Christians are called on to help build up God’s colony, the church, within the fallen human world.

Others have viewed this relationship between the Holy and culture as not being one of opposites, but rather having a more dialectical nature. That is, preachers in this approach see culture and a person’s lived-world experience raising important fundamental questions about life. These questions press for the “meaning of life” in a world that often appears arbitrary, unjust and unfair. However, while answers provided by the culture and human reason are found to be somewhat helpful, they nevertheless always fall short of being fully satisfying. Such answers do bring needed order and partial justice to a chaotic and self-serving world, but they are also always limited by the fact that human reason and experience are historically conditioned and can only go so far in expressing the life-fulfilling nature of the Gospel. In the last analysis, in this approach only the revelation of the Gospel through the Holy Scriptures is able to provide full and satisfying answers. Preaching is consequently called on to highlight the questions raised by human reason and culture, and then to proclaim the answers to these questions as provided by the revelation of Holy Scripture and tradition.

Still others have seen the two sides of this relationship to be more parallel than is depicted in the dialectical approach.

That is, the best of human reason corresponds with the truth of God's revelation. Therefore, it is through a combining of sound human reason and Scriptural revelation that the Truth of our culture and the will of God are truly uncovered. The truth of culture and the experience of the Holy are seen to overlap and complement one another. It is in this vein that the "Social Gospel" combined scriptural revelation and the idea of human progress. In a similar fashion "Liberation Theologies" have often focused on a complementary connection between Scriptural revelation and Marxist analysis of economic reality and social class. In line with this, preachers who follow this approach work to help bring the "... kingdom of God on earth. The church and world work together in this mission. These Christians believe...the highest insights of culture and the highest moral insights of Christianity correspond."<sup>2</sup>

However, no matter how one conceives of this relationship, it is important to preaching that the preacher be clear in his or her own mind about how this relationship is understood and why.<sup>3</sup> Failure to be clear about this fundamental link will only work to undermine a preacher's ability accurately and effectively to proclaim the Gospel. If the preacher is unclear about this matter then those hearing the sermon will similarly be uncertain about how to relate what is said to the cultural world in which they live.

This understanding, however, must not be something that is simply added on to the end of a preacher's sermon as if it were a final step of applying what had been said earlier. The preacher's understanding of this relationship must inform the whole sermon process from preparation to proclamation. The inner integrity of a preacher's sermon is dependent upon the way his or her theological assumptions and homiletical method of preparation actually embody this relationship. Text, context, and homiletical method must form an integrated theological whole if preaching is fully to realize its goal of vividly and transformatively proclaiming the actions of God in history. In this age of increased concern for the integrity of what is communicated, both interpersonally and through the media, it becomes increasingly critical that those who preach do so with the integrity that comes from this wholistic integration.

By way of illustrating just how such a theological whole might be realized, the remainder of this article will outline a

homiletical method and hermeneutic for preaching which has been found by the author to accomplish this end.

## I. Theological Assumptions

In preparing a sermon it is important at the outset to be clear about the theological presumptions which inform one's understanding of the relationship between Christ and culture. At the base of the hermeneutic which informs my preaching are five presumptions. The first of these is the acknowledgement that all cultural forms of justice are limited and ambiguous by nature. This presumption emerges from the recognition that all persons and their creations, including their cultural perceptions and creations, are finite by nature. They occur in a specific place and time, and are thereby conditioned by their historical place. This fact is compounded by the unavoidable reality that persons are always called on to serve the needs of more neighbours than their resources permit. Therefore the best of intentions and practices will always be forced to serve some more fully than others, thereby simultaneously doing justice and injustice with the same action. In the face of this we as Christians are of course called on to pay special attention to the needs of those who are marginalized within society. However, even in doing this we can not escape the dilemma of ambiguity, for the needs of those who are marginalized also often run in different directions. Policies which in fact serve the justice of one group of marginalized persons can easily run at cross-purposes with the needs of other marginalized persons. It is just this unavoidable quality which makes such situations tragic. Moreover, this ambiguity is further intensified by the natural sinful propensity for persons to take advantage of one another. Of course, the reality of this ever-present ambiguity in life is not a justification to stop seeking justice in society. Rather it is a mandate to recognize that all forms of justice are always to be in a process of on-going reform, renewal, and transformation.

The second presumption of my approach affirms that revelation occurs in, with, and under culture. Central to the Christian understanding of the incarnation is the affirmation that God has entered history in a most special and direct way. This affirmation reinforces the creedal declaration that God as creator remains in close relation with us and all of creation, despite

the reality of our sinful distortion of that creation (including ourselves). This affirmation is further confirmed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ. Through the Easter event we as Christians are promised by God that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone. All this means that God has chosen to come to us where we are, in history, and through history to work to restore all creation. It is to this end the Christians pray each Sunday in the Lord's Prayer, "... Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This is God's work in history that we pray for, a work that we pray to be part of. This does not mean that history/human reason and revelation are necessarily the same thing. In so far as revelation is the unconditioned will of God and human culture/reason is by nature conditioned by human finitude, they are not the same thing. However, by the grace of God they are also not unrelated. God has come to us in history because it is only in history that we can encounter and understand God and God's revelation to us. It is only through reason that we are able to apprehend the meaning of God's revelation for us. Therefore, reason and revelation can both be complementary and can also as historical phenomena sharpen one another.

A third presumption emerges from the recognition that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has acted so as to renew and save us and all creation. In this regard Paul Tillich writes,

According to Eschatological symbolism, the Christ is the one who brings the new eon. . . . In the period between the first and second coming the New Being is present in him. He *is* the Kingdom of God. In him the eschatological expectation is fulfilled in principle. Those who participate in him participate in the New Being, though under the condition of man's [sic] existential predicament and, therefore, only fragmentarily and by anticipation. New Being is essential being under the conditions of existence, conquering the gap between essence and existence.<sup>4</sup>

Using then the terminology of Tillich, through God's grace in Christ we have been given the possibility of "New Being". Through Christ the estrangement of existence has been overcome and we have been given the promise of resurrection. This resurrection, however, is not simply a reality that occurred some 2,000 years ago. It is also both the reality of the transforming work of Christ in our time, through the Holy Spirit,

and the promised eschaton when God shall be all in all. The Kingdom of God is both a present reality, fragmentarily, and a future reality yet to be anticipated. In light of this the task of preaching is clear. The aim and norm of preaching and the Christian life is the "New Being" of Jesus as the Christ. The task of the preacher is to point inspiringly to this "New Being" as it works to transform and renew us and our lived-world.

The fourth presumption follows directly from the third presumption. The transforming work of the "New Being" in Christ is something that touches all parts of creation. God is sovereign over and active in all parts of our world, working to renew and transform them. There is no area of culture or history from which God is excluded. Therefore, it must be recognized that the transformative power of the "New Being" has an impact upon both societal reality and inter/intra personal reality. This means that the concern of Christians for the emerging presence of "New Being" necessarily points in two directions. On the one hand, it includes a concern for the social, political, and economic structures which shape the lives of people. Social/societal ethics are an unavoidable part of the preacher's task. On the other hand, it also includes a concern for those psychological, psychic, and inner spiritual needs we have and share with others. Personal ethics must also be a part of the preacher's work. Both of these dimensions of "New Being" must be found in the activity of the preacher if he or she is to be faithful to the Gospel message.

The final presumption emerges from the recognition that the "New Being" in Jesus as the Christ is a transformative reality that is nurtured through community. A community of discourse, support, and renewal is necessary for engendering the personal and social transformation that marks the New Being in Jesus as the Christ. It is through the means of grace, the sacraments, that God forms and sustains this community as the Body of Christ, the Church. Of course the presence of the Church does not always correspond with the historical manifestation of the institutional church in culture. This means that the Church is both latent and present in the society, and latent and present in the church. The preacher therefore needs to identify the presence of the Church wherever it is found, and to encourage Christians to become active parts of this community.

## II. Fundamental Questions

In light of the above presumptions four fundamental questions emerge for my process of sermon preparation. Because these questions grow out of the theological unity of the above presumptions, they form a similar interactive whole. Therefore, in this approach, each of these questions must be addressed in the process of sermon preparation if this unity is to impart a similar integrity to my work as a preacher. Once a scriptural text is selected or identified as the starting point of the sermon I then in turn consider each of these questions.

The first question picks up the interactive relation of the Holy with history and asks, "How is our cultural/lived world context 'breaking open' our understanding of the Scriptural text?" The operative words here are "breaking open". In this context they refer to the giving of new, more fulfilling meaning to the text. Such meaning would be more fulfilling because it would give new purpose, hope and future to persons who hear the text. Of course the source of this new meaning would be the emergence of the New Being in Christ in our time and place. Therefore it is through the on-going creative activity of the Holy Spirit in New Being that the text is renewed and "broken open", to provide us with a fresh understanding of the will of God. In this way history provides both existential questions and theological answers.

The second question complements the first. It asks, "How is the scriptural text 'breaking open' our understanding of our culture/lived world context?" This question recognizes that the scriptural text is also an authentic witness to transformative reality of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ. As such it is through this witness that the existential ambiguity of our historical context is fully exposed and the emerging opportunities for renewed life are made more discernible. Here too both existential questions are asked and theological answers are provided. For many preachers this question often becomes the primary if not the over-riding focus of sermon preparation. However, this is unfortunate because it does not do justice to the full activity of God in, with, and under the reality of New Being. While this question is clearly an important part of the proclamation process, it must always be placed in an interactive relation with the reality of New Being to which the first question points.

As the preacher addresses these first two questions together, the ensuing interaction will begin to expose the shape of a new reality toward which God is luring us. It is this dynamic which prompts the preacher to address directly a third fundamental question. "What is the shape of the new reality toward which God is luring us as individuals and as a society?" Some might view this question as one of identifying the vision of life in the fulfilled Kingdom of God and applying it to the context of present reality. However, this question is not simply one of eschatological vision. The new reality toward which God is luring us is an emerging reality which recognizes the reality of historical process. It is a reality that calls on us to reach beyond our cultural forms of attributive and retributive justice, legitimate as they may be, and seek creative justice. That is, it is a call to set aside our legitimate claims to proportional justice, if, by so doing, we are able to renew our lived world to an even fuller embodiment of New Being.

The fourth question follows naturally from the preacher's activity in addressing the first three. If the preacher is able to discern the emerging outline of the new reality into which God is immediately luring us, then he/she needs to ask the very pragmatic question, "What guidelines might there be for realizing and moving toward this new reality?" The proclamation of the Gospel, of course, needs to inspire those who hear it with a sense of what could be. However, those who hear it also need to be helped to see how we can get from here to there. Without this concern for practical next steps any inspiration which the preacher is able to engender will quickly degenerate from genuine hope into cynicism or apathy.

### **III. The Sermon Process**

To answer the above questions I need to pursue a number of activities. To obtain a thorough understanding of the scriptural text I will no doubt want to engage in some biblical language work. In this way the nuances of the passage will not be lost and the biases of various translators can be taken into account. This work should be further enhanced by the reading of commentaries, historical assessments, and cogent writings in systematic theology which relate to the passage under study. Through such study I can better understand the historical context of the text as well as benefit from the wisdom of others

who have also struggled with the text's meaning. All this can, of course, be helpfully supplemented through personal dialogue with others about the text as well as reading other sermons on the text. Finally, throughout this process I need to maintain an active devotional life. It is through prayerful reflection that I am kept open to hear in ever fresh ways what God is trying to say to us here and now through the text.

A second part of the sermon process will involve the acquiring of a thorough knowledge of the lived world context. This would naturally include a knowledge of the personal and social forces that shape the immediate lives of the people who will hear the sermon. However, it would also include a critical awareness of the dynamics which operate in the larger societal and world context. I need to know the people and their local needs, but this always must also be understood within the larger context of the economic, social, ecological, and political forces that shape our world. To acquire this knowledge I will need to engage in social scientific study related to the issues of the text. However, such study ought not be seen as an isolated piece of work. If I am effectively to facilitate the interaction of scriptural text and history, then this study will need to be part of an on-going awareness of social analysis. Of course I will need to supplement this scientific study with reflection on my own personal experience as well as dialogue with others about what has been learned.

Throughout the above two parts of the sermon process it is important that I maintain an active sense of critical/transformativ<sup>e</sup> doubt. That is, I need to include in my study of the text and the lived world context, a prayerful search for the transforming presence of the New Being in each. And when this presence is found, I need to be alert to the ways in which God is already working through both these manifestations of New Being to bring about a "new creation" for us in our time and place.

However, for the sermon to connect vitally with those who hear it, an image or set of images needs to be found which can point to, capture, or prompt in the listeners (and the preacher) a sense of the "new creation" or New Being that has been found through the above study. The location of such images marks a third part of the sermon process. The form which these images might take can be quite varied. These images may take on the

shape of a narrative or a single verbal picture. They can be tied to a more deductive style or emerge with the sermonic explication of the text as it is viewed with a new set of glasses. However, whatever form is selected, these key images should be pre-figured in the sermon's introduction, thread their way through the body of the sermon, and finally frame the sermon's conclusion.

After the sermon is prepared and preached the final part of the sermon process is undertaken. That is, the impact and appropriateness of the sermon must be assessed. On the one hand, such an assessment would of course include a concern for the technical side of preaching. "How well was the sermon delivered?" "How effective were the images used?" "Did the sermon treat the Scripture text and the lived world context in an accurate and fair manner?" However, in a deeper sense the sermon itself must also be seen as a part of the process by which God is renewing and transforming us toward new creation in Christ. Therefore, the assessment of the sermon must also include a sensitivity to whether, or to what extent, the sermon was helpful to this process. The success of the sermon in this sense would depend on two factors. It would depend on the quality of work which the preacher gives God to work with. It would also depend on what God would intend for us at this time and in this place. That is, does God intend for this to be at least a minor "kairotic" opportunity for those who hear the sermon? While the preacher has little or no control over the will of God and the second factor, it certainly should be the intention of the preacher to provide God with the very best resources with which to work. And should a "kairotic" moment in fact present itself, it behooves the preacher to take responsibility for seeing that the opportunity is not unnecessarily lost.

#### IV. Postscript

Throughout this presentation attention has been given to the activity of the preacher. Concern has been expressed for how in process of sermon preparation text, context, and homiletical method should form an integrated whole. An illustration of a sermon process which facilitates such integration has been drawn out. However, in all this a fundamental truth

must be underscored and not overlooked. In the last analysis, it is God's grace which is *the* source of transformation and renewal. Though we as preachers can be used as instruments of that grace, it is finally God who must receive the honour and glory for what is accomplished.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Theodore G. Tappert (Trans. and Ed.), *Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) 32.
- <sup>2</sup> William J. Carl III, *Preaching Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 130.
- <sup>3</sup> For a fuller treatment of this topic as it relates to preaching see *Ibid.* 126-137.
- <sup>4</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 118-119.