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ON PREACHING

AND THE PREACHER

Kenneth Kuziej

The ministry of preaching is inspired by the Holy Spirit and based in the Word of God. The necessity of the call to preach is defined by St. Paul in Romans 10: "How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14-15) The preacher, therefore, is one whom the Spirit of God uses to convey the Good News of Jesus Christ to men and women.

THE PREACHER

In history, the preacher is analogous to the Old Testament prophet. The word "prophet" (nabi) in Hebrew probably is related to Akkadian and Arabic words meaning "to call" or "to announce."¹ If this is so, the ancient prophet can be understood as a preacher, or as a proclaimer of the Word of God. The modern preacher also is an announcer. The vocation of preacher therefore stands in direct line with those great and powerful voices of the Old Testament as Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Isaiah. These prophets courageously proclaimed or announced God's Word in spite of the most incredible opposition. Today, this vocation of proclaiming God's Word in spite of opposition is still manifest in

1. B.D. Napier, "Prophet", *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 900.

living memory in such prophet and or preachers as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King. The spirit of the Old Testament prophets in speaking for God, by God is at work in Christian preachers today.

Today, the preacher is analogous to the broadcast newsmen. The role of the news announcer on television or radio is that of a herald: one who proclaims or announces the most important of the day's events. Similarly, present day preachers are proclaimers or announcers of God's Good News of Jesus Christ.

Like the broadcast newsmen, the preacher is only the one who reports the news . . . he is not the shaper of events.² This fact properly subjects the proclaimer to the proclamation, and ultimately, to him who issued the proclamation. The media, contrary to Marshal McLuhan, should not be the message. This realization keeps humble all announcers, whether broadcast newsmen or ministers of the Word.

But, though humble, the newsmen, like the preacher, should be recognized as a man or woman of integrity, credibility, and authority. This is necessary because often events are formed in the most unbelievable manner. For instance, it is shocking to hear of the assassination of a great political figure. In the same way, God's events, his news, also are stunning: God became man. He, though divine, suffered and died. Yet three days later he rose from death. And he did these things for us! Therefore, when Christian preachers mount their pulpits they must do so with that same spirit of authoritative urgency that television newsmen have when they slide behind their news desks, before the cameras, with their urgent bulletins to read.

THE PREACHING

Christian preaching must be shaped by the Word of God as interpreted by the Church: it must be theological and confessional. It would deny its links with the ancient prophetic ministry of Israel if it only was formed by what people want to hear or like to hear or expect to hear. This is not to say that traditional theological language must be used to proclaim God's Word; rather that the historical truths that God revealed will determine its foundation and its content.

Paradoxically, Christian preaching also must be existential. It must be able to relate God's Word and his Good News to the sufferings, struggles and sorrows of the people of our day and our society. The preacher that avoids the modern prophetic ministry, that is, refuses to become vulnerable in order to minister to today's brokenness, in his preaching will only preach shallow and trite sermons that are a charade of true, prophetic proclamation.

Christian preaching must be psychologically affirmative. Christianity, through the Gospel that it both proclaims and lives, frees people from all that has enslaved them in the past, enslaves them in the present, and would enslave them in the future. The goal of Christian preaching is having men and women

2. In Canada, Canadian Broadcasting Company announcers are not even allowed to write their own news copy.

put their trust in Jesus Christ for the things needed both in this life and after it, and in living lives that are open, honest, fulfilled and joyous. Preaching, by being affirmative, must not encourage people to be over-dependent on the forms, nor sustain neuroses and inhibitions. Preaching, Christian preaching, will not dull or stifle the human spirit.

In traditional language, preaching affirmatively is preaching the Gospel. All Christian preaching must be "rooted and grounded" in the Gospel. It is the Gospel which separates Christians from out of the world and unites them into the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Law is also present in Christian preaching, but never without the Gospel. It is the preacher's exacting task to separate Law and Gospel. Martin Luther said of this: "This difference between the Law and the Gospel is the height of knowledge in Christendom. Every person and all persons who assume or glory in the name of Christian should know and be able to state this difference. If this ability is lacking, one cannot tell a Christian from a heathen or a Jew; of such supreme importance is this differentiation."³

THE FORM OF PREACHING

As in the basic rule of architecture as laid down by Frank Lloyd Wright, the form of preaching follows its function. "The characteristically prophetic phenomenon, always presupposes . . . the decisive impingement of Yahweh upon history."⁴ Thus preaching is the proclamation of God's will and action to people throughout history. This is the function. What is to be the form?

Oftentimes, it seems as if this function just stated above forces contradictory manifestations of the form of preaching. For example, it is a necessity that the preacher be at once imitative and eclectic as well as creative and innovative in the form of his preaching. He must be in the ancient tradition, using the forms and formulas in order to be recognized as a man of God proclaiming the Word of God. For this reason, such liturgical necessities as the Votum and the Pauline benediction (Philippians 4:7) will be used for sandwiching the sermon in a form that gives the hearer the message that he is listening to God's Word for him in his day.

The modern sermon is the major form of preaching today. The sermon has within it much of the same content as the earliest recorded sermons of the Christian Church. In the Acts of the Apostles, the preaching of Peter and Paul show that central to these messages is the astounding fact of Jesus Christ, together with an interpretation of who he is, what he accomplished, and why. (Acts 2:14-40, 3:12-26, 5:29-32, 10:34-43, 13:16-41, 14:15-17, 17:22-31) Without this basic foundation in Jesus Christ, preaching would be reduced to mere moralizing or, at best, perhaps, teaching.

Preachers today must be readers. They must garner ideas, illustrations, and interpretations from their brother preachers of the past. Modern preachers are,

3. Martin Luther, *The Wisdom of Martin Luther*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), p. 12.

4. Napier, p. 905.

therefore, imitative and eclectic, and they stand in the tradition of men and women of God reaching back into the pre-Christian era of ancient Israel.

Furthermore, preachers must mount their well-worn pulpits to claim for their day the authority that is theirs as the spokesmen for God. Preachers are men who "stand within a tradition in which a remembrance is preserved of God's words and actions in the past."⁵

But in no way must a preacher be held to only the forms of the past. James Smart writes, "Never is this tradition merely repeated by him as though of itself it were an adequate revelation of God in the present. Each prophet speaks both in remarkable unity with those who preceded him but also in remarkable independence of them."⁶ The modern prophet, the preacher, is creative and innovative. Though his foundations are in the past, rooted firmly in tradition, his superstructure is all his own, a manifestation of his own emphases and styles and forms of communicating. He must be full of life, life today, and aware of all that which militates to make life worthwhile and all that which brings life down into the dust. The preacher, then, must be acutely aware of his experiences, and must become a collector of those experiences which are the raw material for existential illustrations and sermon themes. Yet, again, all of these themes will be attempted within a basic theological pattern determined by Scripture and by the Confessions of the Church.

Again, the preacher is imitative, but in this case imitative of the methods of communication which are effective to carry the Gospel to the people of his society, time, and place. Today, in North America, for example, the preacher must be acutely aware of the impact of the various electronic media available for broadcast of the Gospel. These media cannot be allowed to be used exclusively for entertainment, education and politics without attempting to put to use their power and influence for communicating God's Good News. Furthermore, the modern drama can be put into the service of Christ, just as medieval dram was, in the morality play. Still further, dance, music and other arts as media of communication are to be exploited for the communication of the Gospel. Thus, in spite of the controversies surrounding them, such filmed musicals as *Jesus Christ: Supperstar* and *Godspell* did yeoman's service in presenting Christ to all sorts of people, pious and impious, religious and irreligious, believing and unbelieving.

At the very least, Christian preachers should be well trained to present the Gospel in an attention-getting manner. The prophets of the Old Testament did some very attention-getting things. Hosea, for example, married a harlot to illustrate Israel's unfaithfulness to her God (Hosea 1:2-3). With a precedent like this, it is clear that nearly any way may be sought to strike the collective consciousness of the hearers in a manner that will be well remembered and will present clearly the will and Word of God.

For this reason, preachers must be aware of the psychological impact of certain rhetorical techniques and press these techniques into the service of the

5. James D. Smart, *The Interpretation of Scripture*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 176.

6. *Ibid.*

Lord. The use of the dramatic pause, the cataloguing of powerful words, the necessity of illustrations, the inflection and intonation of the voice are all among the rhetorical techniques that preachers should cultivate. Effective speaking, it cannot be emphasized too strongly, is more often based in the mastering of these simple methods than in the assembling of meaningful and logical contents of speeches. It provided the success of the smoothly articulate Herbert W. Armstrong. It accounted for the effectiveness of Adolf Hitler in mobilizing the German people.

Much of the effectiveness of good preaching depends upon professional preparation of the sermon. This does not preclude the Holy Spirit in the preparation and delivery of the sermon; rather, it is to be understood that the Holy Spirit is present in and abetting the process. The preacher should be aware of the task that he has before him when he sits down at his desk and looks up his sermon text. He begins to encode the ideas of the text in such a way that those ideas may be easily decoded and understood by his hearers; hearers who include young and old, believers, doubters and unbelievers, rich and poor. This task of preparation begins with interpretation in the exegesis of the biblical text. The preacher must know what he is talking about! After this, the central theme or message must be organized into a textual exposition. It should be based, of course, on the exegesis of the biblical text and not on some preconceived or hoped for meanings of the text. This exposition, then should be expanded into a professionally prepared sermon, made effective by the use of rhetorical techniques. The sermon should be clearly written and in simple language. It must be stylized into a sermon, and delivered as such in a powerful, attention-holding and memorable manner. By no means must it be lengthy. By no means must it be a dry presentation of a series of facts.

The sermon must be concerned with critical, vital, life-or-death subjects. Trivial subjects are not to be presented from the pulpit. Fine points of Old Testament Law are to be avoided as are the meaningless trivia which fills our lives today. For example, "sermons" on the question of whether or not Christians should dance or smoke are not fit subjects on which the preacher should use his time.

Rather, "we preach Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23), which is the ultimate *kerygma*. The proclamation of Christ, and his atoning sacrifice is the purpose of the preacher's call into the ministry of the Word. His job, his responsibility, is to proclaim that message in ways that will bring the grace of God's mercy and forgiveness and reconciliation and atonement to as many people as possible.