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The Practice of Preaching

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Pastors who hope to help congregations reflect on the difference between simple *works of mercy* (feeding, clothing, housing) and a guiding *principle of mercy* (a risky ongoing process of sharing the crucifixion and resurrection of the majority of the world's people) will find encouragement in these essays. This book is good preparation for accompanying a congregation through the process of writing a mission statement. It challenges North American readers (for whom it is written) to consider what it means to be the church in a world of misery and injustice that is marked by movements of liberation and unexpected hope.

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The Practice of Preaching

Paul Scott Wilson

Toronto: The United Church Publishing House; Nashville:
Abingdon, 1995
329 pp.

Pretty well every year someone, somewhere, offers a homiletical primer to preachers and seminary students. Each is important if only to signal contemporary concerns and developments, and to share the accumulated wisdom of the author. Occasionally a primer becomes a homiletical benchmark. Henry Grady Davis' *Design for Preaching* (1958) was one; Fred Craddock's *As One Without Authority* (1971) and David Buttrick's *Homiletic* (1987) are others. My judgment is that Paul Scott Wilson's *The Practice of Preaching* will be the latest homiletical benchmark.

H. Grady Davis signalled two major shifts in homiletical theory: the concept of organic unity (content and form are inseparable), which opened the door to ways of knowing other than rational logic; and the perception of language as the creator of reality, which allowed us to begin to perceive the sermon as the creation of an alternative world in which we can live. Craddock articulated the postmodern shift from preacher-oriented to listener-oriented preaching, which means that it is the listener, finally, who through participation in the sermon makes meaning. Buttrick examined meticulously "what happens" in the preaching-listening situation ("images", he concluded, are "formed in consciousness") and thus installed ancient rhetoric as once more the companion discipline of homiletics.

But homiletics has always been uneasy with this mate because rhetoric, after all, is the "art of persuasion" while preaching's aim is to "proclaim". Does not, therefore, the embracing of rhetoric mean the wholesale abdication of the *kerygma* of the N.T. in favour of catering to the needs and whims of the listener? In a day of huge media influence, panic regarding member

losses in mainline churches, and extensive experimentation in worship and preaching, this is an urgent question.

Enter Paul Scott Wilson, Professor of Homiletics at Emmanuel College in the Toronto School of Theology, and an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada. Wilson brings an astonishing array of expertise, knowledge, wisdom, and experience to the task, but especially notable is his expertise in language derived from intensive study of literature, literary criticism, and classical rhetoric (he is the author of a novel as well as of volumes on the imagination in preaching and the history of preaching). Thus he is exceptionally well equipped to meditate on contemporary preaching.

Homiletics, he notes, has sprung from four great historical traditions, and these become the four sections of the book: the Oral Tradition, the Rhetorical Tradition, the Hermeneutical Tradition, and the Tradition of Poetics. This clear identification of the homiletical lineages which then become dimensions of preaching itself is the first reward of the book. More than anything else, these Traditions at once liberate us from myopic enslavement to the urgent and pressing needs and challenges of the moment.

The Oral Tradition instructs us in relationships. Preaching is "God's Event" in which the listener gets involved in a relationship with God and a relationship with the preacher (chap. One). As such it is an "Oral Event": words can be barriers to, rather than aids of, God's event (chap. Two).

The Rhetorical Tradition reminds us of "three ways in which we may be persuaded by a speech": *logos* (arrangements and facts), *ethos* (the character of the speaker), and *pathos* (emotional appeal) (p. 78). On the one hand this recalls us to acknowledge that the hegemony of rationalism has ended, and on the other that elements such as the emotions, experience, storytelling, the imagination, metaphor, and metonymy are in fact *ways of knowing*. So it is precisely in the context of rhetoric that Wilson speaks of theology at length. He investigates "theology and rhetoric" (chap. Three); discusses "theology in the sermon" (chap. Four); and advocates "preaching as an event of hope" (chap. Five)—a chapter in which he creatively shows the necessity for "judgment and grace" if the sermon is to be a Christian sermon, faithful to the Scriptures and the creeds of the church. This chapter was one of the most rewarding to this Lutheran reviewer's heart. Wilson prefers "judgment" and "grace" to "law" and "gospel" because of various unhelpful baggage carried by the latter terms—not the least of which is the tendency to view the O.T. as law. Principally rewarding is the placement of judgment and grace under the umbrella of hope: for the listener "... generally something is grace if it sounds hopeful, at least hinting at God's action and the responsibility God takes, or has taken, to enable change" (p. 148).

The Hermeneutical Tradition engages us in an interpretative process which takes us from a text of Scripture through to the creation of a new text, the sermon. The route through this process becomes a four- or five-day journey, the map for which is the "hermeneutical square" with its four stages synchronized with the preacher's work week. The first or Monday

stage is determining “what the text says” (chap. Six); the second or Tuesday stage is determining “what the text means” (chap. Seven); the third or Wednesday stage is articulating “what experience says” (chap. Eight); and the fourth or Thursday/Friday stage is creating “what the preacher says” (chap. Nine).

The Tradition of Poetics engages us in an intensive study of language and the uses of language. In three chapters Wilson discusses not only the “arrangement” of the sermon (unity and form) but also examines the two major ways in which people tend to think: linear (progression and movement) and polar (digression). “Linear thought (definition, sequence, and metonymy) progresses along lines. It connects points along those lines, and makes claims concerning the nature of their relationships (i.e., ‘this is part of this’; ‘this leads to this’; and ‘this links with this’). Polar thought (comparison, contradiction, and metaphor) digresses from linear lines of thought. Two ideas are connected as poles on the basis of some shared identity, yet often not in strictly logical ways. The degree of perceived identity varies from assertion to assertion (i.e., ‘part yes and part no’; ‘yes is no’; and ‘both yes and no’)” (p. 221). In a final chapter (Thirteen) Wilson directs his attention to the promise and perils of stories.

Two major concerns or emphases pervade this book. One is theology. Rarely has a homiletical manual been so firm and insistent on the theological nature and the theological purpose of preaching. “The first lesson from systematic theology,” he writes in chap. Four, “is that we keep God near the center of our discussions, instead of affording occasional glimpses of God at the periphery. Too often as preachers we are tempted to think that we are preaching about a doctrine, or a truth, or a story, or a text, and we forget the more basic focus, that we are preaching God” (p. 83). The second is language. Even as Wilson keeps God constantly in mind, so he keeps the listener constantly in mind. We are, after all, attempting to persuade others of the truth of Jesus Christ.

Wilson deliberately and intentionally presents the book as a homiletical textbook: “This textbook introduces students to the breadth and depth of the homiletical field, much in the manner that we might expect of an introductory textbook in any other field. . . . It is addressed directly to students engaged in theological education, and tries to speak to the concerns and questions that they have as they begin studying homiletics. It is written to challenge students in helpful ways, without the expectation that they will have finished with their learnings when their preaching course is done” (p. 14f). In keeping with the textbook purposes Wilson incorporates many innovative features to assist the learner: each section and chapter begins with an italicized abstract; side bars summarize sections and emphasize important points; exercises are incorporated to enable the student at once to join theory and practice; review and discussion questions are posed at the end of each chapter; “guidelines for teachers” include creative ways of grouping different combinations of chapters instead of reading the book through from beginning to end; appendices on preaching at funerals and

weddings and recommendations for the preacher's library, and an index of names and subjects conclude the volume.

I suspect an area of practical difficulty for students and continuing homiletical students will be the rather formidable section on Poetics. We meet here the preacher's nemesis—jargon. Poetics (and Rhetoric) like every other discipline has its jargon. Given the shift in preaching from being preacher-oriented (“I speak; you listen”) to being listener-oriented (“Come, let us consider what is going on in life and how, because God is at work, we encounter God”), preachers need to become students of Poetics, and Wilson is finely qualified to teach us. But he does not make Poetics easy. Especially his extension of metonymy—at base a figure of speech characterized by the use of one thing or attribute (“crown”) in place of the name of something it symbolizes (“sovereign”)—into the paradigm of linear thought (even as metaphor is the paradigm of polar thought) seems excessively erudite and discouraging.

And speaking of language, I have one small personal gripe. Wilson is fond of using “such that” (e.g., “We want the congregation to be encountered by God such that their lives issue in faithful action”, p. 186). What's wrong with plain old “so that”?

This is an extraordinarily well thought-out and thought-through manual. It is made to order for the student in the seminary, and also highly recommended to preachers in the parish. For example, the built-in learning features such as questions for discussion make it easy to use by groups of clergy. It not only defines the place to which the postmodern era has brought us, but also names and marshalls our resources for faithful preaching in this place without on the one hand becoming irrelevant and on the other selling out to postmodernism.

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