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PREACHING: WHERE WE'VE BEEN

Eduard Richard Riegert

After a survey of the history of preaching,¹ Clyde E. Fant points out that "with respect to the proclamation of the gospel, a definite cycle can be observed for two thousand years: *search, discovery, excitement, routinization, boredom, disillusionment, search.*"² He estimates that we are largely "somewhere in the process of search" and a few are "on the edge of discovery."³

From my observations and experiences we are now well into the "discovery" of and participation in the exciting endeavor that has come to be called "narrative preaching."⁴ This paper will, however examine in some detail the prior stages. While it is always hazardous to attempt to draw threads of development out of the tangled skein of even a few decades, nevertheless, such an effort is rewarding and, unless we have become totally a-historical, necessary.⁵

ROUTINIZATION, BOREDOM, AND DISILLUSIONMENT

Utilizing Fant's stages, it seems to me that by the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, preaching had become thoroughly routinized, Society was moving along on a never-ending highway to affluence, and the Space Age dawned with excitement but not with any surprize: it was expected in our brave new technological world.

Preaching was a routinized part of that stable world as far as congregations were concerned. Yet the routinization of it was being expressed for those who cared to hear.

The latter 1960s and the early 1970s brought vast upheaval to the church and, indeed, to all society. Preaching, along with other disciplines and professions and institutions, came up for severe criticism and challenge. One articulate critic was Pierre Berton. In his book commissioned by the Anglican Church of Canada, *The Comfortable*

1. Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William Pinson, Jr. (eds.), *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching*, 13 vols. (Waco: Word Books, 1971).

2. Clyde E. Fant, Jr., *Preaching for Today* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 10.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

4. In addition to Fant, primary bibliography includes Milton Crum, Jr. *Manual on Preaching: A New Process of Sermon Development* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1977); Henry H. Mitchell. *The Recovery of Preaching* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1977); Frederick Buechner. *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1977); Fred B. Craddock. *As One Without Authority*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979); Richard A. Jensen. *Telling the Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980); Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, Charles L. Rice. *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

5. For a helpful survey of the last three decades see Roger W. Nostbakken, "The Context and Mission of Canadian Lutheranism," *Consensus*, 6, 1 (January 1980), pp. 17 ff.

Pew, he devoted a section to what he called the “lukewarm pulpit.”⁶ His criticisms were:

- a. The preacher doesn’t seem to know what he is talking about.
- b. The language is archaic.
- c. The sameness of format (monological).
- d. Preachers did not seem aware that “to the average man, the real image of the Church emerges from the Sunday sermon.”⁷
- e. The message is irrelevant and weak.
- f. The preacher is incredible (in part because of his language which is archaic and hackneyed; in part because he says only what is safe to say, following the “party line” rather than personal convictions).

Criticism of preaching came not only from outside the church, but from inside as well. Some called for a moratorium on preaching. These criticisms went deeper than Berton’s, and may be summed up as follows:

- a. Preaching is authoritarian. The very act of ascending into a pulpit implies that the sermon is ten feet above criticism.
- b. Preaching is monological. It is a “zero feedback” situation.
- c. Preaching is *one* person’s ministry: it should not be so dominant in a community dedicated to ministry.
- d. Preaching is idolized as *the* form of communication when in fact it is often the *least* effective means of communication.
- e. It is irrelevant: not only ten feet above criticism but ten feet above reality.

What provoked these criticisms? A changed situation; indeed, a changing society. We were plunged into recognition of a new society. We had broken into a technological age, and the values of an urban — not even to mention an agrarian — society could no longer cover the new situations created by technology. Indeed, the old values, we discovered, were no longer in force.

The war in Viet Nam demonstrated that the leaders of society (in government, industry, the military, and in institutions) were not committed to the proclaimed ideals of the nation but were callously committed to an economy of exploitation. But this, we discovered, was not possible because the world was interdependent.

Electronic media had made the world a “global village”, to use McLuhan’s phrase, and not only could the individual now become a news analyst, but he was almost forced to do so as he was able to set actual world happenings alongside “official” interpretations. The credibility of public officials and institutions waned; the pain suffered by peoples on the other side of the world were *our* pains. We could not sit aloof from the rest of the world.

With these changes as background, let us examine a few factors that impinged immediately on preaching.

1. *The crumbling of traditional authority structures.* There was a time when the minister was the “parson,” that is, *the* person in the community. He was educated, and that gave him the authority of learning; he was a man called of God, and that gave him divine authority. Perceptive persons in the 1960s saw that the parson had, on this Con-

6. Pierre Berton (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965) part Three, section 3.

7. *Ibid.*, P. 114.

continent, now lost that position and status. Clyde Reid wrote in 1967, "The minister is no longer the most significant man in the community; the atomic scientist, the engineer, the psychiatrist, and others now occupy more prestigious positions. We may believe that the minister should be at the top of the list, but in the eyes of the world it simply is not so."⁸

As an authority figure the minister has many competitors, including not only other equally or more learned persons in the community, but an increasing host of TV and radio personalities, sports and political personalities, not even to mention the many electronic evangelists. What the preacher says is now weighed over against what other authorities say.

Of equal significance is the fact that the pew sitters have discovered that they, too, are important and their thoughts and opinions are important. As Reid said, "The average parishioner is learning that . . . because of enlightened personnel practices, his views make a difference on the job; higher levels of management grant him the right to share in decisions. His point of view is considered valuable in many of the organizations to which he belongs because of wide-spread use of group dynamics insights. He is learning by experience that *his authority* is worth something, and that he need not sit in abject dependence upon his superiors in many areas of his life. He can contribute, speak and be listened to, and make a difference to others who share his life. He is learning to participate meaningfully in his world."⁹ As one layman said: "The Church sees my role as filling up a seat. I now know I'm worth more than that!"¹⁰

The preacher is thus no longer an unquestioned authority — neither in the community nor in his own congregation.

The erosion of the preacher's authority is paralleled by a similar erosion of the church's authority. There was a time when, even if an individual minister was such a wash-out that he was scarcely tolerated, the authority of the church served to maintain him. That too is no longer the case.

2. A second factor that impinged immediately upon preaching was the unignorable *advent of pluralism*. Up until the 1960s Canada simply thought of itself as a Christian country, despite the fact of extensive Native populations who continued to practice their traditional religions, and despite the fact of extensive Near and Far East populations (Chinese, Japanese, Arabs) who practised their traditional religions.¹¹ Then we realized Canada's population was international (as over against European and English) and pluralistic. Indeed, the sudden blossoming of all kinds of sects and cults (like the Hare Krishnas and the "Moonies") was a rude awakening to people who still naively thought of this as a Christian state.

The preacher encountering this pluralism suddenly found himself at a loss for words. Up to this point he had always assumed a Christian background for his hearers; even nominal Christians, even agnostics, even professed atheists (!) could be assumed to have some cultural residue of Christianity and a kind of inherited reverence for the Bible.

8. Clyde Reid, *The Empty Pulpit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 51.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

11. See Harold Coward and Leslie Kawamura (eds.), *Religion and Ethnicity*, The Calgary Institute for the Humanities Series (Waterloo: WLU Press, 1978); and Peter Slater (ed.), *Religion and Culture in Canada* (Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1977).

But in the 1960s the preacher realized this was no longer an assumption he could afford. And no longer could he assume that Christian pastors had an automatic set of societal privileges, or that the Christian religion had automatic pride of place.

How does one preach when a cultural commonality is no longer assumable?

3. A third factor that impinged at once upon preaching in the 1960s and early 1970s was that, with pluralism a fact in society's life, *people had alternatives to the church's concept of reality.*

In the Middle Ages the church's concept of reality was the only one available. There were two powers under which everyone lived: the church and the state. These were ordained of God. From the church the people expected help to weather life's crises, resolve their guilt, and gain eternal life, and to the church the people pledged obedience and faithful receipt of administered grace. From the state people expected peace, good order, and protection, and to the state they pledged loyalty, obedience, and vocational service.

That concept of reality endured through the Reformation, and, with some variations, into the 1960s. (It is not a dead concept, yet!) The Industrial Revolution and the advent of science severely strained this concept of reality; the technological society of the 1960s relegated it to *one* concept of reality, and made it appear hopelessly outdated at that. Alternative concepts of reality were available from other world religions, from the new cults and — most persuasive of all — from technology and the new human sciences.

From supreme authority, the parson found himself reduced to one voice competing with many voices.

4. A fourth factor that at once impinged upon preaching was the sudden *rise of a growing corps of professionals who intruded upon what heretofore had been largely the pastor's "turf"*. Psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, psychologists, and guidance counselors became the new priests of technological religion; social workers became the new prophets; experts on economics and human development and interpersonal relationships became the new teachers. Even the preacher's last stronghold, death, was taken from him by a new breed of sophisticated undertakers.

The preacher had lost his identity and his job. He seemed to be like a medicine man displaced in the McMaster Medical Centre!

Preach? It scarcely had meaning anymore. Those criticisms made of preaching — authoritarian, monological, one person ministry, idolization of one form of communication, irrelevant — were well based: the homiletic cycle had moved from routinization in the 1950s to boredom in the early 1960s, to disillusionment in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

THE SEARCH

But the "search" phase was also underway in the late 1960s and continued through the 1970s. Let me speak of that in a couple of particulars.

1. *Communication studies.* We learned from communication specialists that the old model of communication, in which a Sender sends a message to a Recipient who receives it and obeys it because it comes from an authority, was hopelessly naive. The whole process of communication is, in fact, so enormously complicated

and so beset with obstacles that communication is, as Reuel Howe expressed it, a miracle.¹²

At least two dynamics became of importance to preachers: the need for feedback and the need for support groups. The need for feedback in the process of communication was clearly demonstrated by specialists.¹³ Preachers began to build it into their preaching by utilizing sermon preparation groups, sermon feedback sessions, and dialogue preaching.¹⁴ Those who did not go so far changed their style from a monological style to a dialogical style, that is, from an authoritarian "shut-up-and-listen" style to a conversational style which took the hearer seriously, i.e., not as merely a hearer but as a *dialogue partner*.¹⁵

The need for support groups was demonstrated when it was pointed out that every listener has a peer group which will either support or reject the preacher's message, and, if the preacher's message is rejected by the hearer's peer group, or conflicts with the opinions or values of his peer group, the hearer will *not* obey the message.¹⁶ To take a simple example: suppose the preacher preaches a sermon against pre-marital sex; the teenager listening may be moved to a like opinion. But the group with whom the teenager hangs out may advocate pre-marital sex. The teenager is caught between message and peer group, and the peer group will likely win unless one of two things happens: the teenager finds a *new* peer group which espouses the value of sexual fidelity; or, the teenager is given significant support in his or her decision to obey the message (e.g., by a church youth group, family, congregation).

This recognition of the importance of peer groups in communication forces the preacher to preach in a context of ministry in which preaching is joined with pastoral care, education, social ministry, and, indeed, the whole network of parish organizations and life. Preaching does not stand alone; preparation and follow-through are vital.

2. *Marshal McLuhan*.¹⁷ While McLuhan falls into communication also, his unique insights deserve and require especial attention.

In his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*¹⁸ McLuhan divides history into three phases. The first, the oral/aural phase, was the phase of *sound*. Ears heard what mouths spoke. It was, of course, the time of oral cultures, reflected in so much of the Old Testament and determinative, too, of Jesus' ministry and the form of the gospels. In this phase the word was king. The word was an entity of *power*, it did what it said: a blessing blessed; a curse cursed.

With the introduction of the phonetic alphabet came phase two, the era of print. This is the phase of *sight*: eyes read what hands wrote. Print, because it demanded only *one* sense, sight, effected a revolution. *It separated thought from action*: one could singly read about action without ever doing anything. *It separated person*

12. Reuel Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (N.Y.: Seabury Press, 1963).

13. Cf. Clyde Reid, *The Empty Pulpit*.

14. See W.D. Thompson and G.C. Bennett, *Dialogue Preaching* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969).

15. See Reuel Howe, *Partners in Preaching* (N.Y.: Seabury Press, 1967).

16. See Clyde Reid.

17. I am indebted to Richard Jensen, *Telling the Story*, pp. 12 ff. for this appraisal of McLuhan.

18. (New York: Signet, 1969).

from person, permitting the growth of abstract information which could be received and dealt with privately. *It linearized life.* Ears can hear 360 degrees, but eyes following printed words plod along linearly. McLuhan argues that the Greeks interiorized this linearity and developed a world of order and organization, of uniformity and logical progression. With the development of the printing press, therefore, the world entered its modern period, leaving the old world of oral-aural culture behind in favour of a “Gutenberg” world of linear print.

Richard A. Jensen, a professor at Wartburg Lutheran Seminary in Dubuque, has summarized some of the characteristics of this Gutenberg world:¹⁹

- a. It is a world that puts its accent on the individual. We sit alone and read.
- b. Learning becomes visual. The world of sound becomes superfluous, indeed, intrusive.
- c. Grammar and dictionaries become indispensable. Words follow rules.
- d. That which is logical is that which is linear. “I don’t follow you” we say when we are puzzled.
- e. In order better to understand a printed text the reader requires someone to throw light on that text — the assumption being that the meaning is in the text. But in the oral-aural phase, handwritten manuscripts, like stained-glass windows in cathedrals, were instruments through which light shone, exposing layers of reality. The difference for exegesis is immense: the text is the truth (printed Gutenberg world) vs. the text is a medium or vehicle of truth (oral-aural world).
- f. “When a text . . . is understood as a light on phenomenon then we as readers of the text are to fix our attention on that text with a high degree of intensity. We are to have a fixed point of view.” The text becomes an object from which we are to get information.

With the advent of electronic media, claims McLuhan, we have entered a third phase of history. In this place *all* our senses are stimulated, and stimulated at the same time! Two effects may be noted:

First, electronic media have returned us to the pre-Gutenberg village, except that now the whole world is the village. We live in a “global village” because, by virtue of the instant transmission provided by the electronic media, we share whatever happens in the world. Just as in the ancient village everyone knew when an enemy attacked or a catastrophe happened to one of its members, so we all know when Afghanistan is invaded, and 20,000 people are killed in Algerian earthquakes. And we are forced into involvement; we are participants: we ran and hurt and died with Terry Fox.

Second, the involvement of all the senses simultaneously bursts the bonds of linearity. The question is not, “What did the preacher say?” but “What happened?” And if nothing happened except a linear, logical sermon and a linear, logical liturgy, then nothing happened, and it was Dullsville.

The preacher, if he were to continue, would have to be creative. He would need not just to give information, but he would have to move: he would not simply talk

19. *Telling the Story*, pp. 16-18.

about something but he would make that something experienced.²⁰

3. *Hermeneutics*.²¹ I recall vividly, as a preacher wrestling with sermons, getting frustrated by exegetes who simply refused to do anything more than tell what the text meant. They were, they said, doing the historical-critical method of interpretation, and their responsibility ended when they had explained what the text meant: if I wanted to know what it *means*, I would have to answer that myself.

My frustration arose not because of the method. For the historical-critical method has been and continues to be marvelously productive: giving us an ever more accurate text of the Old and New Testaments, enormously detailed understanding of the ancient Near East, the intertestamental period, Judaism in the days of Jesus, extra-canonical writings, early Christian sects and cults, etc.

My frustration arose from the fact that the method didn't go far enough. Of course, that gave me, as a preacher, a definite job: I had to discover what the text means today, in the light of what it meant.

The new hermeneutic derives exactly from that sort of frustration. For we finally began to realize that that method, while it could give us all kinds of information about the text and its occasion and context, its author and hearers, was finally not really being listened to by us. We were treating the text with scientific objectivity — the same way we would treat a moon rock — and when we had gotten all the information we could out of it, all the truths we could get out of it, we could put it back on the shelf and remain unchanged. All we had was more knowledge. McLuhan would have said, "Of course. What else can you expect from a Gutenberg approach?"

And those Christians who, because of various pious conceptions of Holy Scripture, were having their own troubles with the historical-critical method were often not any better off either, since they, too, were simply getting holy truths out of texts; in both instances faith became the believing of information. We were all thoroughly linear and scientific people. Light had to be shed on texts.

People like Bultmann, Gerhard von Rad, Gerhard Ebeling, Ernst Fuchs, James Robison, Amos Wilder, Robert Funk, and many others began to view the text differently: not as something upon which light must be shed but as a bearer of light, as a medium through which light shines.

Gerhard Ebeling has put it as clearly as any of them.²² He reached back to the "sola scriptura" principle of the Reformation and showed that this was indeed a hermeneutical principle. For the Roman Catholic church of the Middle Ages, the church's tradition was needed to explain (throw light on) scripture; but to this Luther said "No!" Sola scriptura says, "Scripture is not obscure so that the tradition is required to understand it. Rather, scripture possesses *claritas*, i.e., it has illuminating

20. Henry H. Mitchell, an American black preacher, points out that the goal of sermons has typically been to show: " 'To show' has such a strong and subtle hold on preachers because it appeals to vanity, providing opportunity to share one's clever interpretation or startling distinctions between things . . . Black preachers have historically set out to *move* persons . . . from one level of growth and spiritual maturity to another, from one level of commitment to another, and from one pattern of concrete action to another more like unto Christ." (*The Recovery of Preaching*, p. 145).

21. For an excellent summary, and one very helpful to me, see Jensen, *Telling the Story*, chapter 3.

22. Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), Chapter 11, "Word of God and Hermeneutics."

power, so that a clarifying light shines from it, among other things also on the tradition."²³

It is helpful if we change the image. Instead of using the image of light and of seeing, let us use the image of address and hearing. Then we may say: instead of us addressing the text, asking it all kinds of questions so we can get information (our questions being determined by our tradition), the text addresses us, asking us all kinds of probing questions about our life and values and priorities, challenging our self-understandings and our interpretations of human existence. And it is in that address that we hear the Word of God;²⁴ for harking back to Luther, ". . . to the essence of the Word belongs its oral character, i.e. its character of an event in personal relationship, . . . the Word is thus no isolated bearer of meanings, but an event that effects something and aims at something."²⁵

What does this mean for the interpreter and the preacher? It means, says Jensen, that exegesis, as the effort to understand the text, "is only necessary when there is something about the language of the text which hinders the word-event of the text from happening for us. In this case hermeneutics may serve the task of removing the obstacles for us so that the word itself may perform its work upon us."²⁶

Secondly, it means that the primary task is to allow the text to become God's word again as it once was, now — to people of our day. The text is there not to be proclaimed but to enable new proclamation. "The process from text to sermon," writes Ebeling, "can therefore be characterized by saying: proclamation that has taken place is to become proclamation that takes place."²⁷ The process is like this:

Past proclamation Text New Proclamation

"This transition from text to sermon is a transition from scripture to the spoken word,"²⁸ and that spoken word, when it speaks of "the present reality *coram Deo*," is God's Word.²⁹ Simply to rummage around in the text to explain past proclamation is not true preaching; it may be interesting and helpfully enlightening but at most it clears the way for the text's address. That, of course, is a laudable thing, and we usually call it teaching. A preacher, however, will realize that that is not fulfilling the aim of the text: ". . . the sermon as a sermon is not the exposition of the text as past proclamation, but is itself proclamation in the present — and that means, then, that the sermon is EXECUTION of the text. It carries into execution the aim of the text. It is the proclamation of what the text has proclaimed . . . Thus the text by means of the sermon becomes a hermeneutic aid in the understanding of present experience."³⁰ The new hermeneutic, therefore, has put new emphasis upon the Word of God as *spoken word* — that is a very family concept to Lutherans — and thus to preaching. And fascinatingly, it picks up almost exactly the McLuhanesque concern that the electronic media has returned us to a sensate phase much more

23. *Ibid.*, p. 306f.

24. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

25. *Ibid.*, Footnote #1, p. 313.

26. Jensen, p. 64.

27. Ebeling, p. 329.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

30. *Ibid.*

similar to the ancient oral/aural phase than to the linear/print phase.

Interestingly enough, the effect upon preaching of new biblical and hermeneutical developments came to Protestants via an unexpected route, viz., the Roman Catholic church. The new biblical and hermeneutical developments became part of the agenda of Vatican II, with two infectious results: first, an emphasis upon preaching. Just at the time when Protestant preaching hit the doldrums, it was rediscovered or re-emphasized by Roman Catholics! Their enthusiasm carried over; secondly, the development of a new three-year lectionary which came into use in 1969. It was quickly adapted by the Anglicans; the Lutherans, already moving toward a new hymnal, followed suit,³¹ and several others did the same. Adoption of the new lectionary gave preaching a new purpose and new texts and new possibilities. Church presses — not slow to spot a new market — at once began to bring out preaching helps,³² and that momentum is still propelling us forward.³³

4. One last particular needs to be mentioned as part of the "Search" phase of the homiletical cycle: *the rediscovery of story*.

Back in the 1960s University religion teachers were baffled: how did one teach religion to students who were a-historical, who had rejected institutional religion, who despised any "establishment," and who had given up societal and institutional and family values in favour of "doing your own thing"?

They hit upon journal writing. Students were asked to write journals of their life's development. And then they could ask the student, "Why at that juncture in your life did you choose to do so-and-so?" As the students reflected upon such things, they began to realize that their decisions were based on values; once that was admitted one could go on to examine those values, find their sources, compare them with other values — and so move into religious traditions.

It was realized, of course, that such a journal is really a story: my story. But my story is part of a bigger story, that of family and society: our story. And then the question arises: since our story helps to make sense of my little story, is there a story that will help to make ultimate sense out of all the stories? And every religious tradition replies, "Yes!" Christians offer, as the ultimate story, the Torah-Christ story.

With these several developments having come to fruition, the time was right for them to be put together. That was being done by the end of the 1970s,³⁴ and thus the homiletical enterprise, after having suffered the slings and arrows of severe criticism and societal upheaval, was beginning to enter the stage of discovery and even the stage of excitement.

31. See *Contemporary Worship 6. The Church Year: Calendar and Lectionary*, prepared by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; 1973). With further minor revisions this calendar and lectionary was incorporated into the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978). See John Reumann, "A History of Lectionaries: From the Synagogue at Nazareth to Post-Vatican II," *Interpretation*, XXXI, 2 (April 1977), pp. 116-130.

32. See Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Aids and Resources for the Interpretation of Lectionary Texts," *Interpretation*, XXXI, 2 (April 1977), pp. 154-164. This issue of the journal was devoted to the new lectionary.

33. For example, the new series of *Proclamation* commentaries by Fortress Press.

34. Apart from bibliography already mentioned, we may note that Lutheran Church in America homileticians and pastor-evangelists, under the sponsorship of the Division of Parish Services, designed a seminar model in "Narrative Preaching" which was offered to the Synods starting in 1980.