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## Response to David Fler's Preaching in Churches of Christ: Moving Toward a Theology of Preaching

Bruce E. Shields

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# Response to David Fleer's Preaching in Churches of Christ: Moving Toward a Theology

BRUCE E. SHIELDS

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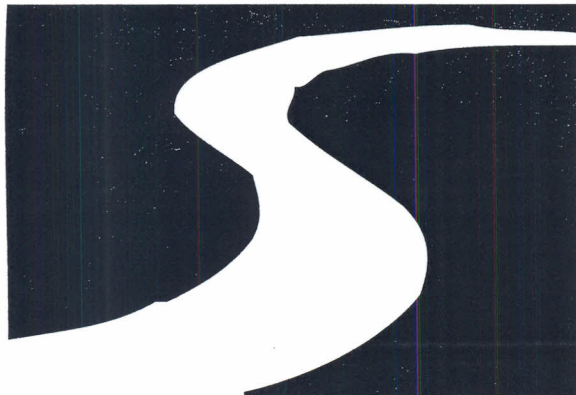
As a minister of Christian Churches, I share some of Fleer's experiences of and perspectives on preaching, but I also see some differences. The preacher who most influenced me was never a full-time minister. His "day job" was in an industrial laboratory. Yet his demeanor in the pulpit, his ability to expose a congregation to the meat of a text of scripture, and his gentle yet firm way with people attracted me to the ministry of preaching.

Thus I agree with Fleer: "One reason we hold preaching in such high regard is because we have experienced the effects of faithful preaching." Preachers stand on the shoulders of earlier preachers—that succession reaching back to the apostolic age.

It might seem odd in the light of church growth theory, but the high point in the history of my home congregation was when that part-time minister was in the pulpit. Since then, several people who devoted full time to the ministry to have presided over a gradual decline in the membership and effectiveness of the congregation. I have no explanation for that except to point to the part-time minister's preaching. God spoke to many people through that preaching.

Since then, I have heard many other preachers who have left a deep impression on me, several of whom Fleer mentions. Having grown to adulthood in the 1950s, attended a mainline, eastern seminary in the 1960s, and preached regularly through the 1970s, I know what Long describes in his Tipple-Vosburg Lectures; and yet I understand it, as does Fleer, from the perspective of an outsider. I was puzzled in the mid-60s by questions about the relevance of preaching.

Preaching is precisely what had cleared the ground to give God room to work in my life. The pulpits I knew were not completely silent on social issues, but they helped hearers approach those issues from a biblical theological standpoint. That preaching did not major in minors. We did not hear a preacher who could get to baptism from any given text, although I don't doubt that there were such preachers among our churches. I thank God that I was fed a balanced diet of Christian doctrine and experience and that it was served with gentleness.



Somehow the preaching in my background was inductive (or indirect) enough that Craddock's revolution didn't seem so revolutionary to me. I responded to *As One Without Authority* very positively, but that was because the book gave me a theoretical framework for what seemed quite natural to me.

The gravitational pull toward evangelicalism is a factor among us Christian Church people, too. One of our better preachers is now joining the staff of Willow Creek. Because I teach both preach-

ing and worship, I have been watching closely the newer styles of worship and preaching among the faster growing churches in America. There are aspects of it that I doubt will last—and a lot of music that I know will not last—but history is full of periods of worship change that leave some things for the next generations and much for the trash heap.

What I see as extremely positive is the trend toward planning the whole service of worship to communicate some aspect of the gospel. Here is where I would like to push Fleer some. Nearing the end of his section subtitled “The Evangelical Challenge,” he writes, “In stark contrast to the rest of the service, Kensington sermons are typically used as teaching instruments, always with ‘fill in the blank,’ three-point outlines for the congregation to mechanically follow.” He concludes the paragraph, “The irony, then, is that the same worship that creatively employs all facets of Augustine’s ‘trinity’ (to *teach*, *please*, and *persuade*), abandons two of the three in the sermon.” Doesn’t that point to the power of the total worship experience to proclaim the Gospel—to both honor God and attract seekers?

If contemporary homiletics has a general weakness, it is (in my opinion) paying too little attention to the service of worship as the primary context of preaching. We analyze the rhetoric of the sermon but rarely think about the power of the whole service to communicate.

Fleer suggests that we go back to Augustine for sermon rhetoric, but even Augustine refers in his sermons to the patterns of worship in the period of the church year when he was preaching. The ongoing story of the life of Jesus spelled out week by week from Advent through Pentecost might not seem like rhetoric, but it could be thought of in terms of Aristotle’s *Poetics*<sup>2</sup>—the art of telling a story. It seems to me that what classical rhetoric failed to do for Christian proclamation was to deal with telling the story, and that is what poetics is all about.

Perhaps it is time to go back beyond Augustine to the master storytellers of ancient and more recent times—not just to enhance the storytelling of preachers but also to find help in developing the drama of worship so that the service, including the sermon, will truly “grant God the space to act, and thus create the potential for new awakenings.”

BRUCE E. SHIELDS

Dr. Shields teaches New Testament and Christian ministry at Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, Tennessee.

#### END NOTES

- 1 See articles, “Why Can’t We Be Comfortable as Evangelicals?” by William R. Baker and “Why Can’t We Be Just Christians?” by Robert F. Hull, Jr., in *Christian Standard* (May 16, 2003): 4-9.
- 2 Aristotle, *Poetics*. Trans. Ingram Bywater (New York: The Modern Library, 1954, 1984).

