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Theology and the Ministry of the Word

RON HIGHFIELD

I have a special love for preaching and preachers. I can think of no greater calling than the call to proclaim God's word. I divide my adult life into epochs by the fine preachers I have heard, among whom are Jim Woodroof, Harold Hazilip, Bill Love, Dan Anders and now Ken Durham. The church needs and deserves great preaching. And I believe no preaching that avoids theology can be great.

THEOLOGY OF PREACHING

Preaching God's Word

The sermon is the word of God proclaimed. What we preach should not be based on expert insight from the human sciences or our personal experience. It should not aim merely to evoke religious emotion. Nor should it be an exercise in self-discovery or self-exploration. The sermon is the word of God.

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The preacher must proclaim God's Word. But this is an impossible task, for human beings cannot speak the word of God. God's Word is *God's* Word. It does not originate in our feelings, in our minds, or in our experience. No human effort of prayer and piety can guarantee that we may speak God's word. No critical or uncritical Bible study can assure that our words will be God's words. Nevertheless, we must speak God's word; the church lives by it. The church must follow and be guided by it because it has been commanded to

serve its Lord and him alone. The sermon is the word of God.

These thoughts force us to ask three questions. (1) What is the word of God? (2) How dare we preach? (3) What is the place of our human efforts in sermon preparation and delivery?

The Word of God¹

The word of God is God's speech, the mind and revelation of God (1 Cor 1). The word of God is the speaking God. No one knows God apart from God's word, and God's word is God's revelation. The church was called into existence by the word, and it exists in the world and comes together in obedience to the word to receive the word. The sermon is a fundamental form of the word of God. Karl Barth speaks of three forms of the word of God: the word of God revealed, written and preached. Scripture is the primary witness to the eternal word that became incarnate in Jesus Christ. It points authoritatively to the Word of God. Preaching is the secondary witness to the Word; it points to the Word on the basis of scripture. It actualizes the apostolic witness to the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit.²

How Dare we Preach?

How dare we rise up to the pulpit and speak in God's name? How can we have any assurance that God will speak to the church through our fallible human words? We can have confidence only because of God's command and his promise of power. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations...I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:19, 20). He told the disciples to wait for "power from on high" (Luke 24:49). Timothy is instructed to "preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:2). In Ephesians 4: 11, Paul said, God "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers." Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to "remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit, Jesus promises in John 16:8, "will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment." We dare preach because we dare not preach! We can preach because we must preach!

Why Study?

In my native home in rural North Alabama, there is a religious group that refuses to study for sermons and denies the necessity of an education for the preacher. It bases this practice on its belief in the power of the Holy Spirit. Really speaking God's word depends on the Holy Spirit. After all, Jesus instructed his disciples, "Do not worry about how you will defend yourself or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say" (Luke 12:11, 12). Studying, it argues, betrays a lack of faith.

This view has a certain plausibility, but it does not follow the pattern of scripture. God has in fact chosen to work through human instruments by taking up human personalities, using human efforts and education to accomplish his will. God certainly does not need our talents or efforts, but he uses them for his own reasons.

In scripture there is a dual affirmation of obedience and grace, of self-discipline and the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, of human wisdom and divine inspiration, of human freedom and divine sovereignty. The coordination of human and divine activity is carefully maintained in scripture. Clearly, the divine side has priority, but both are affirmed as real.

This two-fold form of our relationship to God can help us understand the relationship of our study, experience, and speaking to our charge of preaching the word of God. Our works cannot guarantee our justification, and our study cannot guarantee that we can know or speak God's word for the church today. But we can see from scripture that it does not contradict it either. God can use it. Indeed, we are commanded to use all our abilities and opportunities to his glory.

THEOLOGY IN PREACHING

Some preachers preach as if the Christian faith consists of thousands of laws, ideas, and stories unconnected by anything except by the fact that they are all somewhere in the Bible. Studying theology makes us aware that this view is inadequate. God is one, and the Bible records an unfolding story, a story of creation, election, judgment and salvation worked by the one God. As Christians, we see the Bible narrative as a story leading to Jesus Christ. And God's story in Jesus is also God's story with us. Jesus Christ is our true being and our life, our model and our destiny. This story line is the overarching meaning of the whole Bible and of its many details. We must of course allow the biblical data to give nuance to the one story. We should not simply ignore the data or use it as an occasion to tell the main story again. For the main story has many twists and turns as well as many implications and applications.

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Michael Casey points out in chapter nine of his helpful book, *Saddlebags, City Streets and Cyberspace*, that our biblical scholars have been urging us for some time to give attention to the literary and historical context of the text we wish to interpret.³ While I would not deny this principle, I find it inadequate. We must also interpret a text in its theological context, the context of the whole faith as it was made explicit in the scriptures and as its implications have been developed in the church. Lamentably, however, the combined impact of our therapeutic culture and recent biblical scholarship (much of which is explicitly anti-theological) on contemporary preaching has been to nudge it toward its current neglect of doctrine.

Expository or Topical Preaching?

I cannot give you a history of this movement, but in the late 60s and 70s there was a movement away from topical to expository preaching. Most preaching in Churches of Christ before 1965 was largely topical, consisting of either doctrinal or moral topics. Certain issues in the local church or in the wider church determined the preaching. These issues were conceived under topics, and preachers preached topical sermons, drawing on their knowledge of doctrinal patterns that run through the scriptures. The hermeneutic



of command, example and necessary inference and our felt need to defend the “distinct” identity as a church facilitated this approach. They go especially well with commonsense epistemology and the “debate tradition” of preaching.⁴

This style of preaching came under fire with the advance of a greater historical awareness through historical and literary study of the Bible and the loss of faith in the “sectarian” identity of the church. The weaknesses of topical preaching were said to be: (1) it lends itself to the proof-text method of reading the Bible, which does violence to the literary character of

the texts; (2) it facilitates the preacher preaching his own ideas; (3) many texts are never preached, and the church thus gets a limited view of the gospel.

According to one theory, expository preaching is the remedy for these problems. (1) By preaching on a text of scripture and allowing the text itself to determine the points of the sermon, the preacher can satisfy the biblical scholars who demand that we interpret a text in its literary and historical context. (2) By preaching through books of the Bible and allowing the text itself to select our points we can avoid the subjective and arbitrary nature of topical preaching. If we preach through the Bible, the expository theory maintains, we will have a balanced preaching schedule. We'll give the church exposure to the whole biblical message.

Let's think about this idea. It is true that in topical preaching you do not focus on the literary nature of the texts to which you refer. And an expository sermon gives opportunity to do that. But why must we assume that we should do this in a sermon? As long as the preacher carries on a responsible historical and literary reading of scripture, why is it necessary to make reference to such preliminary matters in a sermon? Why can't a topical sermon be responsible to literary concerns without being explicit about it?

This first point actually brings up a weakness in most expository preaching. There is a great temptation to focus on historical and literary issues in the course of the sermon. It is not the sermon's primary purpose to teach methods of Bible study, however, but to proclaim and apply the word of God. Some expository preachers bore and starve the church with their constant reference to Greek words, scholarly opinions, and exegetical observations.

Now, with reference to the second point, does expository preaching better help the preacher to

remain balanced? Not necessarily. If a preacher is a one-sided person he will say whatever he wants from a text as easily as from a topic. And a topical preacher, if he studies the Bible, reads widely, listens to his congregation and prays, can find just as much balance as the expository preacher.

The expository theory assumes gratuitously that the Bible is written with a direct proportion between quantity of material and importance of emphasis. But is it safe to assume that the Bible has the right proportions of teaching on every need for every age, so that in preaching through the Bible we will be assured that we are doing the right thing for our congregation?

Another problem presents itself: if we let the text determine our points and make only those that the text makes, we doom ourselves to irrelevance. For we cannot address the unique and particular needs of our congregation in its place in history. We cannot address important questions that never entered the horizon of the Old and New Testament eras. What Karl Barth said of theology also applies to preaching. Theology does not primarily ask what the Bible says, but what should we say on the basis of what the Bible says.

Narrative and Theology

Narrative preaching, according to Michael Casey, is the current style of much preaching in Churches of Christ as well as the contemporary American church generally.⁵ Casey points out such advantages of this style as that people can listen to it without falling asleep and that it's more representative of the Bible, since the Bible is a story full of stories.

The emphasis on the narrative nature of scripture and of our lives is quite overdue. But I don't think a sermon should be a series of stories, even Bible stories. Casey quotes Fred Craddock to the effect that stories don't illustrate points; they are the point. I really doubt that. How could a story — one that made sense anyway — have no point? Unless a story "points" outside itself in some way how can we understand it? How can we know it is a "story"?

Even if you tell a story just for entertainment, it must have a point. Otherwise, how could it even entertain? If a story entertains, it does so because it creates a narrative pattern that the listener finds meaningful. It can be a tragic, comic, or heroic pattern.

Each event or character in a story gains its meaning by its relation to the whole story. But the story as a whole can be meaningful only because of its analogy to our own narrative experience of life. Thus, the narrative world a story creates will be consistent or inconsistent with the narrative world of our experience. Simply by its existence, a story forces us to come to grips with its challenge to our narrative self-understanding. We may accept the story as making a true point or reject it as making a false point. It may change our narrative self-understanding or we may reject its world as a possible way of understanding ourselves. The meaning of a story, therefore, is not the story itself but the story's projected narrative world, the way things work or should work. Stories always have a point.

The effect of a story depends both on the audience to which and on the context in which it is told. If the setting is just right, the story needs no comment. But in the case of Bible stories, parables and narratives, we are far from the original setting. We must interpret these stories. We need not think of interpretation as translating a story into abstract ideas or concepts, however. We can interpret one narrative by relating it to

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another narrative. First, we need to make explicit the narrative world of the Bible stories themselves. Then we can set that narrative world alongside our own narrative self-understanding (or that of our age), thus challenging us to adjust our self-understanding to the biblical view of how things work and should work.

A Renewal of Doctrinal Preaching?

I believe we need a renewal of doctrinal preaching. I don't mean that we should return to preaching theology or conducting ecclesiastical debates in the pulpit. But we need to preach in a way that helps the church understand the faith and how to live out that faith.

As a child I heard lots of doctrinal preaching. Most of those sermons, however, were ecclesiastical; they concerned those doctrinal points that gave a distinct identity to Churches of Christ. Then, in the course of my lifetime, this style of preaching came under attack and finally was pushed out of the mainstream church. It was replaced by one of three types: (1) life-situation preaching that preaches to the felt needs of individuals, e.g., stresses of modern life, coping with divorce, marriage, family life, etc. (2) Expository preaching. This style claimed to be more biblical than the doctrinal preaching of the biblicists. (3) Narrative preaching. Narrative, it was said, fits both the Bible and life better than abstract doctrinal preaching.

There is another cause for the abandonment of doctrinal preaching. Preachers who abandoned doctrinal preaching usually experienced simultaneously a loss of confidence in the doctrine preached in those sermons. The change in preaching style was not merely a stylistic change; the content also changed. One does not hear too many narrative sermons whose point is that instrumental music in Christian worship is a sin. I've never heard an expository sermon against Premillennialism.

When we abandoned the traditional style and content of doctrinal preaching, we abandoned doctrinal preaching altogether. Instead of learning to preach a fuller gospel enriched by a study of the neglected biblical teaching, we shifted into a moralistic or therapeutic mode.

I believe we need to recover doctrinal preaching. If we preach a sermon to get people to do the right (moral) thing but give them no theological understanding of why this thing is the "right thing," we may actually undermine their faith. We make Christian morality seem arbitrary or completely separate from theological understanding. In many cases of therapeutic preaching, we use modern psychology as a source rather than the word of God.

The church needs great preaching because God is great. God's greatness is the chief theme of theology, and the praise of God is its chief end.

By doctrinal preaching I mean preaching whose primary aim is to help the church understand the Christian faith in its internal coherence and its implications for how we understand the world and how we ought to act in it. If you understand doctrinal preaching in this way, you can see that all sermons

must have a doctrinal component. Of course no sermon should focus on doctrine without showing its implications for the way we think, live, and feel. Likewise no sermon should focus on how we should live, feel, and think without relating those activities to the whole faith.

So, I would argue that every sermon ought to bring the whole faith to bear on the whole human being. I find it helpful to understand human beings as thinking, acting and feeling beings, as having intellectual, moral, and esthetic dimensions. The proper object of thinking is truth, of action is good, and of feeling is beauty. But all three are one. Thinking and feeling are kinds of actions, action and feeling can be the objects of thought, and action and thinking can be beautiful or ugly.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). The Christian faith points to God as the true, good, and beautiful. Every sermon ought to tell his truth so that we may know him, point to his

goodness so that we may love him, and show God's beauty so that we may adore him. A particular sermon may focus on one or another of these dimensions, but it is incomplete unless it brings all three into view.

A sermon may concentrate on morality. It should show us the good and right way. But it must also help us understand its goodness as demanded by the truth of the faith. And it must show us the beauty of the true and good way, so that our heart-felt obedience may arise out of worship and proceed in joy.

A sermon may focus on understanding the faith. It should show us the coherence of a particular doctrine with the whole faith. But it should also show us how this teaching leads to the good way and reflects the beauty of God, so that we are led to imitate and worship God as well as understand him.

A sermon can also focus on the beauty of God. Its primary object may be to call us to worship our glorious Lord. But how can we worship adequately unless we understand the one whom we worship. And what kind of worship is it that does not lead to imitating the beautiful goodness of our God?

The way I have defined it, all preaching must be doctrinal. If a sermon begins in a life-situation, it must bring the whole faith to bear on that situation. If you preach a narrative sermon, you must relate all other narratives to the master narrative of God's story with us as it is told in scripture. If you preach an expository sermon, you must relate your text to the whole faith and bring the whole faith to bear on the whole human being as thinking, feeling and acting.

CONCLUSION

The church needs great preaching because God is great. God's greatness is the chief theme of theology, and the praise of God is its chief end. Blessed is the congregation, therefore, whose preacher is immersed in the theology of the greatness of God.

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NOTES

- 1 The most extensive study of the doctrine of the Word of God is Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I, Parts 1 and 2, which together contain 1373 pages.
- 2 See *Church Dogmatics* I.1, 88-124
- 3 Michael Casey, *Saddlebags, City Streets and Cyberspace* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1995), 125-136.
- 4 See Casey, chapter four (47-55) for a study of this style of preaching.
- 5 In chapter thirteen (191-204), Casey examines this new trend.