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# The Role of Character in Preaching

Dave Bland

In the 1984 movie *Mass Appeal*, Jack Lemmon plays the role of a Catholic priest named Father Foley who has been assigned the responsibility of mentoring Mark Dolson, a young upstart seminarian. Mark is an idealist who wants to right all wrongs, confront the sins of the people, and call the congregation to change its life. Father Foley sees his task as mellowing out the young man, teaching him some political tact.

Amiability is the way of Father Foley. He is most concerned about his popularity with the people. His sermons are always friendly, charming, personal. He gives the people what they want to hear. He is a salesman selling himself. What is most important is what his congregation thinks of him; from them he derives self-worth.

But as a result of his relationship with Mark, the priest comes to realize his moral responsibility to the congregation. In the end, standing before his parishioners he confesses, "I've married you, I've buried you, I've baptized you. But I've never cared enough for you to risk losing you." The way the priest has lived has affected the way he has viewed his task of preaching.<sup>1</sup> The issue he wrestles with is that of character.

The important role that character plays in the process of sermon preparation has become lost in the shuffle of more popular issues, issues that concern style and form. Currently, for example, narrative preaching is heralded as the salvation of the pulpit. It is believed that narrative

preaching will bring the pulpit out of the doldrums of the past several decades. But renewal in preaching will not begin at the level of style. Renewal will begin with the development of godly character in the one who proclaims. Faithful preaching flows from the life of one who is being shaped by the character of Christ. Little interest, however, is given to this dimension of sermon preparation. Why is that? Why is it that the role of character is ignored in recent homiletics?<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for this are complex, but central to the answer is an understanding of the independent power of Scripture. A current theology, articulated by Luther and Karl Barth, holds that the effectiveness of the Word does not depend on the power or the character of the one proclaiming.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Scripture itself appears to make this affirmation. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises that as the rain and the snow produce fruits in the field, "so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose . . ." (Isa 55:10–11). Regardless of the obstacles, God's Word will produce fruit. It does not ultimately depend on the character of the preacher for its effectiveness.

Markus Barth tells about a fraternity that decided to do a mock service of an old-fashioned revival meeting as its contribution for a skit night, with one student as "preacher" and others as "audience." The "preacher" ex-

aggerated the antics of the typical evangelist, mimicking his gestures and voice. The “audience” gave him verbal feedback all along the way with a barrage of “hallelujah’s,” “amen brother’s,” and “preach on’s.” They generated quite an electric atmosphere. A janitor who happened to overhear the service had no clue that it was an act and responded to the invitation!<sup>4</sup> The “preacher” was an impostor—so was the janitor truly converted? It seems likely to me that he was. The gospel has power to change lives apart from the character of the preacher who proclaims the message. In fact, on one occasion Paul wrote of missionaries who were preaching the gospel out of envy and rivalry. But he rejoiced that, in spite of their partisanship, Christ was proclaimed (Phil 1:15–18)!

**O**ut of concern to not depreciate the power of the Word, the church has unintentionally developed a theology of preaching that has marginalized the life of the preacher. He is simply a conduit through which the Word flows to do its work. Such a perspective lies behind the statement that preachers sometimes use from the pulpit to strongly enforce an idea: “This is not me speaking. This is God’s Word!” Preachers are exhorted by teachers and mentors, “Get out of the way of the text so it can be heard.” The life and character of the preacher, they believe, get in the way of the Word’s exercising its power in the lives of people. By no means do we want to limit the power of the Word, but the “conduit paradigm” of preaching misses the whole meaning of Jesus’ call to discipleship. It omits the preacher’s responsibility to incarnate the Word that he preaches. The gospel first lays claim to the life of the one who proclaims.

Paul’s central concern in preparing for the proclamation of the Word is character development. Character is the issue that he addresses in 2 Corinthians. Unlike 1 Corinthians, which is concerned primarily with the message, 2 Corinthians is focused on the messenger. The issue is not doctrine, but Paul’s behavior. Some are saying that Paul is not a true minister of the gospel. He lacks confidence, he possesses marginal speaking abilities, and he has been terribly unsuccessful in the ministry. Paul responds by appealing to his own life, listing the suffering he has endured. His suffering for the cause of Christ has qualified him to proclaim the message.

Paul offers a glimpse of specifically what brought him into ministry in 2 Cor 3:1–11. The starting point for Paul was not his gifts nor his mastery of a set of techniques—

not that Paul discounts either one. He speaks elsewhere of the value of identifying and using all the gifts in the body. And his letters are filled with rhetorical techniques aimed at penetrating the minds and hearts of his listeners. But neither of those represents for Paul his primary qualification to preach. Nothing within Paul qualifies him (3:4–6). Rather, he is a part of something bigger: he is a part of the ministry of Christ, the splendor of which surpasses all prior ministries—even that of Moses (3:7–11). Paul has been captured by a vision of the glory of the Lord that compels him to preach. That vision now shapes the way he lives. He is a man of integrity who has renounced disgraceful and underhanded ways. He offers his character as that which qualifies him to preach. For Paul, the starting point of his ministry is a character that is shaped by the splendor and glory of the Lord.

Character formation is Paul’s concern in the Pastorals. The problem with the false teachers, Paul asserts, is that their lives are morally bankrupt. He describes them as “lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim 3:1–9). In contrast, Paul exhorts Timothy to live differently. He is to observe Paul’s conduct (2 Tim 3:10), to train himself in godliness (1 Tim. 4:7), and to set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity (1 Tim. 4:12). That which qualifies Timothy to proclaim the Word is the moral conduct of his life.

**A** preacher who enters the pulpit armed only with the latest homiletic theory and a “professional” mindset may succeed in communicating God’s Word—but that preacher’s influence will be severely limited by his façade. The preacher’s character can never be isolated from the context of his preaching. The first question a preacher should ask in preparing a sermon is not, How can I preach this text? but, What kind of person ought I to be in light of this text?

As a preacher prepares his sermon each week, he should begin with an examination of his own character. Conventional wisdom says that sermon preparation does not count toward one’s own spiritual development—that a preacher must set aside quality time to meditate on the Word apart from his preparation for the sermon. That anemic perspective implies that a preacher’s private devotional time is the only time when real spiritual growth

occurs. It assumes that his study in preparation for a sermon is directed primarily toward the spiritual well-being of the congregation and not that of himself. Conventional wisdom concludes that there is little spiritual value for the preacher in sermon preparation. But preparation for the Sunday sermon *is* a spiritual activity. To treat it otherwise is to view the process as only a technique. The act of sermon preparation is an exercise in moral and spiritual development.

The formation of moral and spiritual character is the beginning of renewal in the Christian pulpit. Richard Lischer has stated the point well:

In fact, renewal will not begin with the sermon at all. It begins with those who make sermons. The first step in the recovery of preaching is the renewal of our faith in the priority of Jesus Christ and the priority of his language toward the world. . . . Where do sermons come from? They come from prayer, worship, and the daily witness of ordinary Christians.<sup>5</sup>

However, just a word of caution in all of this. The issue of character is distinct from the issue of personality. Character has to do with the qualities of God that are manifested in one's daily life. Personality relates to the physical, mental, emotional, and social qualities that enable an individual to interact effectively with others. The Corinthians wrestled with this problem.<sup>6</sup> The church is not a cluster of satellites that orbit around a preacher; a preacher does not promote a "personality cult."

Alan of Lille, in one of the hundreds of manuals on the art of preaching that were popular during the medieval period (1200 C.E.), describes seven stages in the preparation for the task of preaching. He calls them the "Seven Rungs of Jacob's Ladder."<sup>7</sup> The first six are these: confession of sin, prayer, thanksgiving, careful study of Scripture, inquiring of someone more experienced about Scrip-

ture, and teaching Scripture to others. Then comes the seventh rung: preaching publicly what one has learned from Scripture. According to Alan of Lille, only after moving through the first six spiritual disciplines is one prepared to proclaim God's Word. It is in the context of those spiritual disciplines, I believe, that preaching and corporate worship take on new significance. The prophet Micah summarizes it this way:

"With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:6-8)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In addition to examining how the character of the preacher is portrayed in the media, it is also interesting to look at how such character is portrayed in modern literature. See James P. Wind's article, "Preacher and Preaching in Literature," in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 378-82.

<sup>2</sup>See Richard Lischer, "Before Technique: Preaching and Personal Formation," *Dialog* 29, no. 3 (1990): 178-82.

<sup>3</sup>Lischer, 178.

<sup>4</sup>Story told by Fred Craddock in "The Preacher and the Preaching," *Reformed Review* 44, no. 1 (1990): 5-14.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Lischer, "The Interrupted Sermon," *Interpretation* 50 (1996): 179-80.

<sup>6</sup>See 1 Cor 1:10-17.

<sup>7</sup>Alan of Lille, *The Art of Preaching*, trans. Gillian R. Evans (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 15-16.