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Teaching Preaching

By C. Philip Slate

Some ministers preach well without formal training in homiletics; others preach poorly in spite of studying preaching. Furthermore, few people would dispute that, without formal training, “the poorest preacher who ever preached can preach better than we can live.” It would appear at times that teaching/studying preaching makes little difference in performance. Nevertheless, people who aspire to preach, or to preach better, seek help in various forms. They may imitate (often his eccentricities) an admired preacher, read books on homiletics, or attend classes on preaching. So, over against the view that preaching is more gift than accomplishment, it will be assumed here that teaching preaching is a legitimate response to the desire to learn and an important contribution to ministerial training.

Since little has been written on the subject,¹ considerably more research needs to be done on the “pedagogy of preaching.” But it is well known that a class on “Preparation and Delivery of Sermons” alone will not produce what is expected in and of most preachers today. Listeners tend to negotiate a messenger-message connection, so that preaching involves what one is as well as what one does. From the Pastoral Epistles forward, discerning church leaders have understood that point. Whether they verbalize it or not, churches expect preachers to know their message, believe it, and preach/teach it effectively; they expect preachers to relate properly to others and possess credibility. Although there is no single model for preachers, what they are expected to be and do is fairly complex.²

The bane of many a preacher is imbalance. He may be well informed in scripture and have the relationship skills of a road sign; or be liked by everyone, yet function with saucer-depth biblical knowledge. Here, an attempt will be made to identify the components of teaching preaching.

Components of Teaching Preaching³

1. The Person. Perhaps we have all heard clever preachers whose grammar was flawless, exegesis free from serious error, and illustrations apposite, but who somehow left us cold because they lacked passion and self-involvement with the text. No preacher is authentic without believing the message (cf. 2 Cor 4:13–14) and, like Ezra, constantly seeking to do it personally (Ezra 7:10). Barclay is partially right in saying,

Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that. Preaching is the outrush of the soul in speech. Therefore, the elemental business in preaching is not with the preaching but with the preacher. It is no trouble to preach, but a vast trouble to construct a preacher.⁴

It is not possible to teach in two or three homiletics classes what aspiring preachers should be learning and doing in worship and in personal spiritual development over a period of time. The lack of person-building is partially what accounts for ministers in high places falling through

money, power, and sexual immorality.⁵ It is not surprising that Paul urged Timothy to pay attention to both his life and his teaching (1 Tim 4:16), and no wonder that Paul himself should find it necessary to defend his character (2 Cor). Like it or not, hearers negotiate a message-messenger link that affects their attention to and perception of sermons. This part of “teaching preaching” should be done as much by parents and the Christian community as by a homiletician, although he would fail should he omit goading the student to personal godliness through various spiritual disciplines.

But while basic godliness and dedication are expected in all who preach, all preachers must not be expected to be alike. In fact, our brotherhood would be in trouble if all our preachers were like any one of us, since no one person is adequate for all situations. It would be a mistake to push a Jimmy Allen into a Batsell Barrett Baxter mold, or the other way around. Nationality apart, Scottish James Stewart could not have been an English Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Phillips Brooks was right in saying that “preaching is communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. Neither of those can it spare and still be preaching.”⁶ Teaching preaching involves the admonition to holiness, the preservation of temperaments, and the use of the accumulated past in each person’s life. Jesus did it with Saul of Tarsus. The teacher of preaching is often pressed hard to determine justly what needs to be changed in a student and what left intact, but cloning himself or some ideal preacher should not be the aim.

2. Handling Scripture. Unless one is an old-line liberal or an existentialist, the task of preaching should involve mediating the written word of God to hearers so they hear it with the intended impact. True, as indicated in the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1ff), the condition of the human heart has much to do with the reception of the word, no matter how poorly or well the word is presented. But for people who claim that faith is generated and nurtured by the testimony of scripture, the chief task should be to get that message across to hearers so that it is perceived as somehow vitally related to their lives.

The “good” preacher must have some ability in exegesis of the text. To make demands from the text that were never intended by the writer and that are not legitimate extensions of the intended meaning constitutes a mishandling of the word of God. Failure to bring the demands of the text to the lives of people is disloyalty to God. Thus teach-

ing preaching involves work by the one who teaches textual analysis and exegesis as well as the one who teaches the “public address” aspect. No amount of smooth rhetoric can compensate for poor facility with the word of God.⁷ The preacher-in-training must be impressed with the necessity of both knowing and “handling aright the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15); failure in this will destroy the work at a critical stage.

There are two basic orientations to preaching the word, each parallel to the two major legitimate studies of scripture. Exegesis/Commentary, endeavoring to unfold the meaning of a book or section of scripture, finds its homiletic counterpart in expository preaching. Systematic study of a particular subject finds its counterpart in topical preaching. Both types of preaching are important and, done well, beneficial. But ideally—perhaps, necessarily—responsible topical preaching should be built on a deep substratum of exposition. Otherwise, there is the grave danger of using individual texts out of context and thus proclaiming from a passage what it never meant and could not mean.⁸ A classic case is Colossians 2:21, on alcoholic beverages.

The nature of both Scripture and human beings indicates that people are in desperate need of someone’s opening up the thrust of thought in sections and books of the Bible. The acquisition of faith is causally related to hearing the message of Christ (Rom 10:17), and care should be taken that the message not be obscured. This need may argue for team teaching by an exegete and a homiletician. In such cases, students may observe how to approach texts and then how to turn exegesis into something with “hearable” qualities. A skillful teacher needs to lead students to practice this exegesis-homiletics interface.

3. A Sense of the Audience. Call it what you like—“audience analysis,” “market analysis,” “soil inspection”—unless the preacher is sensitive to his specific audiences, his preaching will be far less than his best, and potentially disastrous. We should have confidence in the written Scripture as “living and active” (Heb 4:12), capable of penetrating far beyond our somewhat clumsy audience analyses. Who has not preached through a biblical book only to have people say, “How did you know that was what I needed?” when that the need was not known to the preacher, and the point touched was only a minor point of the sermon, but still from the text? That is always gratifying and tends to justify Barth’s judgment that the text will create its own runaway. But it is only partially correct; Barth acknowledged

the human place of selecting the text and being discreet with the hearers.⁹ To tell the blind that “the deaf hear” is to speak truth, but not good news. Telling the Quiche Indians of Guatemala that their sins can be forgiven is largely nonsense, but presenting a Jesus of power is not. Preachers cannot escape the responsibility for making choices in the preaching process.

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On the other hand, Fosdick popularized what is now called “life situation preaching,” in which the sermon is always in response to a known need. Perceived audience needs dictate the entire agenda. While a large body of research indicates that “felt needs” are crucial in the change process,¹⁰ human beings cannot be trusted always to feel a need for what they actually do need. A good case can be made for preaching through a book of scripture simply because it is the word of God and, among other things, will likely surface points of contact and need.

Somewhere between the extremes of Barthian neglect of audiences and Fosdick’s uniform life-situation preaching is a median position which treats scripture as canon, normative for life and belief, and people as living in real circumstances of life. While much has yet to be learned, as far as we can determine now, all New Testament books were written to people in specific circumstances. As much can be said for most Old Testament books as well. That does not reduce their force as canon but demonstrates that, even in canonical form, scripture was addressed to specific situations. It is likely that the undertow of Colossians would not have had a forceful appeal to Matthew’s original readers. Similarly, to preach to Japanese as though they were British, or the other way around, might not involve false teaching, but it would involve the perception of irrelevance and thus have a negative impact.

Teaching preaching should prod aspiring preachers to be students of their culture, and specifically, of the people in their ZIP codes. Van Horn’s *Pew Rights: For People Who Listen to Sermons* argues forcefully that listening to people and preaching should be inseparable and indispensable, though serving different purposes. This sense of “audience”

has long been recognized.¹¹ A teacher of preaching will fail his students if he does not sensitize them to the critical need to know those with whom they regularly interact and point them in the direction of such understanding.¹² This is profoundly important in a complex society.¹³

4. *Culturally Acceptable Rhetoric.* Denying that we use rhetoric is like the caterpillar’s comment when a butterfly passed: “You’ll never get me up in one of those things.” Everyone uses some describable form of rhetoric. But, as Oliver pointed out, culture conditions rhetoric.¹⁴ Most people learn many aspects of it in the process of becoming participants in their society. Acceptable packaging of messages in one society may not be acceptable in another, nor from one era to another. Audiences, in one sense, are autonomous and sovereign. Since their expectations and tolerances cannot be ignored, one notable value of research in public address, or speech communication, is the insight gained for message formulation. Teaching preaching should involve some knowledge of the way potential audiences hear and process information. True, some unschooled people seem to “know in their bones” what this involves, while some educated people seem never to learn it and are a pain to endure.

The process is complicated by the fact that not everyone is in the position of current teenagers who are nurtured on television and are often incapable of engaging in “extended discourse.”¹⁵ Again, we are reminded of the need to be ZIP-code conscious.

One of the perennial complexities of preaching, and teaching people how to do it, involves the variety of persons in a single congregation. Age differences, life histories, educational differences, economic disparities, and varied interests loom before preachers as a great kaleidoscope to challenge their ability to make some sense to all of them. The thing preachers might assume their listeners have in common is their confession of Christ, their being Christians, since most preachers preach to the converted. The common element may help them to rise above their differences, or at least to apply the truth of scripture to their different lives. That is where the function of what communication theorists call “developmental materials” (illustrations, anecdotes, metaphors, etc.) comes in, namely, to help people see the point and how it may be related to their lives. This involves what Haddon Robinson calls the “dress of thought,” the way ideas are packaged for a given audience. Jesus was a master at using developmental materials. The

research is clear enough that use of such material is imperative if one wishes to make sense to people in Western society. With few exceptions, students who studied with me at Harding Graduate School (1972–1993) confessed that their chief downfall was the failure to generate a steady supply of really telling developmental materials. A discerning teacher of preaching will direct students in the development of those materials that will make the difference between clarity and fuzz, between the memorable and the easily forgotten.

5. *Perspective.* The values of studying the history of preaching are numerous.¹⁶ The student may broaden his perspective on the preaching task itself and gain insight from the way in which others interacted, poorly or well, with their environment. Immense profit comes from reading about the way in which preachers and preaching have always been criticized, scorned, and denigrated. From the time of Stephen and Paul forward, preachers who strongly affirmed a message they were convinced to be true were opposed and regarded as worthless. It should not be thought strange when that happens today. But in those same difficult times, proclaimers carved out for themselves the reputation of being good preachers.¹⁷ The biblical perspective on preaching, mediating the message of God, is what will most likely sustain those who are scorned by the public and regarded as the scum of the earth (cf. 1 Cor 4:13).

If studying the history of preaching does not occasion the examination of the students' fundamental assumptions about preaching, then that subject needs to be treated separately. Everyone who preaches has some describable philosophy of preaching. A skilled teacher of preaching will help students to develop a philosophy (theology, if you like) of preaching that is consistent with their base of operation in the Christian faith.¹⁸ A crucial issue is determining the nature of revelation from God and then developing a preaching strategy that is consistent with that view. It is a jolting experience for a preacher to discover that his inherited notion of preaching is, after all, at odds with his announced view of scripture. If scripture is the only trustworthy communication from God to humanity, then the principal task in preaching is to make that message so clear and germane to the hearers that they can make a valid response to it.

6. *"Performance."* What a naughty word to use for preaching! But perhaps it is necessary as long as one does not mean by it "playacting" or mere performance. When

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the president of Princeton Seminary spoke to the Academy of Homiletics a few years ago, he reported that weekly, someone calls him and asks him to "send us someone who can preach." In the years I have served as a reference for preacher-acquaintances, usually former students, only one person asked about grades; elders and search-committee members want to know whether the candidate can preach!

Obviously, other things besides pulpit rhetoric are involved in the work of a preacher,²⁰ but usually, effective preaching is expected. A good homiletics teacher can help this aspect of his work significantly by the use of video recording and analysis and by allowing students to "preach" in peer situations. Graduate students particularly offer penetrating comments, both critical and encouraging, to their peers. Often, through these two activities, students uncover both strengths and weaknesses of which they were previously unaware.

Conclusion

The production of a good preacher is thus a product of varied emphases. Ideally, several people should have input in the training of a person who wants to be and do what is involved in preaching. Complex as it is—like learning to crawl—if other things are in place, a person can be taught to preach. And among the things such a person should perceive about being a preacher is the goal of being a lifelong learner. Some potentially powerful preachers have given up the task just at the point in life when they were best equipped to make major contributions. Others go on the shelf prematurely because they do not continue with self-analysis, study, sharpening, and listening. Preachers can do in their forties what they could not do in their twenties; they can do in their fifties and sixties things not possible in their thirties, in spite of popular impressions that one is "over the hill" by age fifty-five. Some preachers are, but not because they are fifty-five. A competent teacher of preaching will hold out that kind of idealism and challenge in the early development of those learning to be and do what is involved in "preaching."

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Notes

¹ Few studies have appeared in the last sixty years. Andrew W. Blackwood, "The Teaching of Homiletics Today," *The Union Seminary Review* 42 (July 1931): 367–81; Henry G. Davis, "The Teaching of Homiletics," *Encounter* 22 (Spring 1961): 197–207; William H. Levering, "Recent Trends in the Training of Homiletics Teachers," *Homiletic* 8 (1983): 6–7. One dissertation on the subject is known, viz., Floyd M. Bresee, "An Analysis of Homiletics Teaching Methods Advocated by Contemporary Homiletic Authorities in the United States" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1971). This dearth is duly noted by Randall J. Nichols in "The Pedagogy of Preaching," *Homiletic* 2 (1977): xi–xv. This writer knows of only one comparative study of homiletics teachers in Churches of Christ, viz., Charles C. Dorsey, "Teaching Preaching: An Examination of Homiletics Teaching in the Churches of Christ" (M.A. thesis, Lincoln Christian Seminary, 1988).

² Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 16–19.

³ There is great value in the list given by Larsen, but he is dealing more with fifteen current issues than providing an agenda for teaching preaching. David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989).

⁴ William Barclay, *Fishers of Men* (1966), 37.

⁵ Cf. Richard Foster, *Money, Sex & Power* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985); Richard Exley, *Perils of Power* (Tulsa, OK: Honor Books, 1988); Clyde M. Narramore, *Why A Christian Leader May Fall* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988).

⁶ Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1898), 5.

⁷ A good treatment of this approach is found in Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988).

⁸ See Philip Slate, "Preaching: 'Hooked on Classics,'" *Image* 6:3 (May/June 1990): 24–5.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 84–5.

¹⁰ On change in general, see Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 3rd. ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1983), chapter 6. On religious change see Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: An Applied Anthropology for Religious Workers* (Techny, IL: Divine Word Publications, 1970), 287–89.

¹¹ Cf. Batsell Barrett Baxter, *Heart of the Yale Lectures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 19__), Part III. For Paul's approach, cf. 1 Cor 9:19–22.

¹² Knowledge of local situations may well take place within the framework of understanding nationwide studies, such as Yankelovich's *New Rules* (New York: Random House, 1981); Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); and Patterson and Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1991).

¹³ For a provocative analysis of this complexity, see Michael J. Weiss, *The Clustering of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

¹⁴ Robert T. Oliver, *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1971).

¹⁵ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Press, 1985).

¹⁶ The most ambitious effort in English is Clyde E. Fant Jr. and William M. Pinson Jr., *Preaching Through 20 Centuries* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1971), 13 volumes. One may be introduced to the field through smaller works like Yngve Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching*, trans. Karl E. Mattson (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1965).

¹⁷ See the useful discussion by Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching Today*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), chapter 1.

¹⁸ How this functions is illustrated in Robert Duke, *The Sermon as God's Word: Theologies for Preaching*, Abingdon Preacher's Library Series (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980).

¹⁹ Early in my life, Jack Meyer's lectures on the preacher's work were useful. The material was later published as *The Preacher and His Work* (Athens, AL: The C.E.I. Store, 1955). Ignoring other dimensions of his work can defeat a person who is superb in the pulpit.