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Reflections Upon Contemporary Approaches to Preaching

by **Tim Kelley**

A few weeks ago I found myself in one of those all too rare, “get your office shaped up” modes. Going through old material I came across a note I had written to the elders of the congregation for which I have preached since 1978. I immediately recognized, by the note’s type-written appearance, that it was dated BC (Before Computer). However, it still represents my views and if anything my views have become stronger in the ten years or so which have passed since the note was written. That old note has inspired these current reflections on preaching.

As I look and listen across the landscape of preaching within Churches of Christ, I find that preachers tend to follow one of four basic approaches to preaching. The first is a traditional approach which has characterized preaching during the first half of this century. Proponents of this approach frequently refer to it as “Gospel Preaching,” while others call it “Guarding the Old Paths.” At its heart is the belief that we have already arrived at a thorough understanding of God’s Word. This form of preaching seeks to defend the particular beliefs that set us apart from other religious bodies. Many of those positions were hammered out through debates with various groups and this approach holds that

they must neither be reopened nor re-examined but rather reaffirmed. Thus, new insights in biblical understanding are rarely sought, and in fact are usually suspect. Moreover, the education and training of preachers outside our tradition is discouraged.

Preaching in this approach is usually topical. Its habitual weakness has been the bringing together of disconnected texts without due consideration for their context, literary form, or theology. Such preaching is perceived by many as defensive, narrow and sometimes unkind.

In its defense, this approach takes the task of preaching seriously. It values both evangelism and the training of new Christians, while resistant to the trendy and faddish. It is correctly suspicious of purely pragmatic schemes designed to attract people but with no clear sense of what to tell them. This approach to preaching asserts the authority of Scripture and insists that there are core beliefs which must be proclaimed.

Yet, are the beliefs which make us distinct from other religious bodies the most important we are to proclaim? This approach to preaching certainly suggests so, by centering on particular texts, selected primarily from Acts and the letters. It has left much

of the Bible, including the Gospels, seriously under-represented.

The second approach to preaching is, in many respects, the opposite of the first and is a reaction to it. This "Confrontational Preaching" primarily seeks to disturb and challenge, while persistently rejecting traditional positions, thought forms, and language. It opens many ideas to ridicule and all ideas to question. Instead of being an apology for the church it often apologizes for the church.

This preaching embarks under the banner of being progressive and stresses change. In addition, the regular use of contemporary music, literature, and cinema as sub-texts for the sermon, demonstrate the importance of cultural relevance in this form of preaching. This approach delights in pointing out the weaknesses of the past church and rarely passes up an opportunity to criticize the modern church. Sermons are frequently provocative, confrontational, and sometimes shocking.

With uncompromising honesty and penetrating criticisms, such preaching challenges us to rethink our faith and make our message pertinent to a changing world. This approach understands that the church is always inter-related to its surrounding culture and seeks to bring the Christian faith in contact with that culture.

Yet, its largely negative tone fails to give a clear statement of that which it supports. This form of preaching seems to be constantly driven by personal hurt and may never get beyond the anger. While there is clearly a market for this kind of preaching, since many feel the same hurt or anger, its success is usually short lived. Whereas the first approach tends to use the Bible as a sword to attack others, this form of preaching turns the blade inward. After a while, people tire of self-inflicted wounds.

A third approach might be described as "Inspirational Preaching" or as an elder of one of our largest churches approvingly described it, "Rah Rah Preaching." Its primary purpose is to encourage and mobilize Christians. This preaching does not see its fundamental task as teaching, defending, or criticizing but rather as motivating. It uses the pulpit to ignite, unify, and uplift, while leaving doctrinal instruction to the classroom or private study. With this approach, the preacher avoids being controversial and the worst of all dangers, being boring.

Sermons in this model are usually brief and intentionally superficial. Everyone should understand, be encouraged, and feel good about what is said. Personal anecdotes and stories may replace exposition of biblical texts. Such stories occasionally move beyond illustration to a more central position, even making biblical texts introductions and illus-

trations for the stories. Biblical theology tends to give way to practical questions such as: "Will the preaching attract people, encourage people, and bring them into our congregation?"

We can learn much from this form of preaching. It is sensitive to the listener and pays great attention to the human condition. This approach seeks to be heard by capitalizing on the power of stories, thus showing us an effective tool for connecting biblical truth to human lives. The preacher attempts to build up rather than tear down and typically moves beyond the debates of the past, thereby bringing us into the lives of people who are unchurched and don't care about our intramural squabbles.

Yet, one must ask if this form of preaching takes the Bible with full seriousness as the source of faith and practice. Further, it is legitimate to wonder whether this form of preaching eliminates the prophetic element from the sermon by removing key theological concepts such as the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the fear of the Lord, obedience to the Word, moral accountability before God, and the need to repent. It is preaching which offers grace without demand, as though there were no calls to discipleship within the story of Jesus.

The great popularity of this form of preaching may keep us from asking these questions but if we are to be a people of the Book (and more importantly of the God to whom the Book points) they must ultimately be asked. If not, our historic commitment to the Bible may become an empty slogan.

The fourth approach might be called "Text Centered Preaching." I describe this approach with a recognized bias, for I am personally committed to its use. While the other three approaches look to the scriptures, this approach is dedicated to making the biblical text(s) the heart and soul of preaching, viewing a search for the truth revealed in scripture to be the core of our heritage. Traditional thought forms and beliefs are valued insofar as they are consistent with the biblical message.

This preaching may be either topical or expository. In topical preaching, however, one is careful that the topic flows from the texts and is not imposed upon them. Often a series of expository sermons through books, letters, or sections of scripture is chosen with the conviction that preaching from the entire Bible will benefit the church.

The potential weaknesses of this form of preaching are serious. The preacher may be tempted to stop with the original meaning of a text and never really address contemporary questions, leaving the congregation with a Bible lesson which never connects with their lives. It is easy to forget that while a sermon should be exegetically sound and should

instruct, it is not a lecture. The preacher may also forget that a sermon should encourage people to actually do something and that it needs to reach the emotions as well as the intellect.

One may carry into the preparation the mistaken notion that every passage is of equal weight or that every passage demands equal time in preaching. The Bible is not flat and all texts are not necessarily worthy candidates for preaching. On the other hand, it has been my experience that some of the unlikeliest texts have proven to yield surprisingly vital messages. The preacher may neglect to preach that which is of "first importance," the gospel, and spend weeks on secondary matters.

Finally, by being overly committed to a series of sermons, the preacher may be insensitive to particular and urgent issues which need attention. Indeed, one may find this form of preaching a convenient escape from the need to confront difficult or controversial issues.

The weaknesses of this approach resides in the preacher and I know them from personal experience. However, they are potential weaknesses, not inherent weaknesses. If the preacher remembers that the two touchstones of preaching are the Word and people, this form of preaching will bless a church. The open Bible provides the preacher with an inex-

haustible source for sermons and a framework for dealing with the most difficult and controversial issues. Such preaching frees the preacher from the weekly nightmare of finding a topic and lays upon him the more important obligation of interpreting the biblical text so that its meaning can touch the lives of the congregation.

This preaching may either be disturbing or comforting but it must ultimately be the disturbing/gracious Word of God. It may be innovative or traditional but in either case it must be rooted in Scripture. It may criticize the church or defend her, but it will do either from the Word not from anger or loyalty to the past. It will (or at least should) be evangelistic but it will trust in the power of the gospel more than style or technique.

Each of these approaches to preaching has something to teach us and we must learn from each other in this endeavor. We must learn from the sternest defender of the faith to the harshest critic of the church and from the most innovative to the most traditional. Yet, ultimately, we must always return to the taproot of our faith, and center in the word of God.

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