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Biblical Resources for Preaching



James Thompson, Editor

Despite the remarkable growth in the literature on preaching in the past decade, no publisher, as far as I know, has produced a significant work on evangelistic preaching. The topic is rarely mentioned in the textbooks on homiletics, and it has not been the subject of any of the growing number of books addressing topics relating to preaching. A lively debate takes place in homiletics on a variety of issues, but little is said about evangelistic preaching. Indeed, it is as if the discovery of biblical and expository preaching brought with it the end of evangelistic preaching.

The simultaneous growth in the popularity of expository preaching and the decline of evangelistic preaching suggests that the two forms of preaching are mutually exclusive. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to name a great evangelistic preacher who worked consistently from a single text of scripture. There is no tradition or model for evangelistic preaching that is expository in nature. Consequently, many preachers, as I have discovered in a number of conversations, feel that they must choose between biblical preaching and evangelistic preaching.

The Preaching Tradition

I suspect that the early Christians would have considered it remarkable indeed to hear that there was a form of preaching that was not evangelistic, for the earliest preaching was evangelistic by definition. The

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Christ event was accompanied by an entirely new vocabulary for public discourse, for none of the old models was suitable to describe the work of the early Christian preachers. Amos Wilder has correctly observed that the birth of Christianity brought with it an entirely new kind of speech. Christian speech involved neither the dramatic arts nor the rhetorical tradition that was known in ancient Greece. While Greek rhetoric was characterized by persuasion, Christian speech was characterized by proclamation. The two common verbs for Christian speech, *kerussein* and *euangelizesthai*, suggests this dimension of proclamation. Indeed, while C. H. Dodd's definition of preaching as proclamation to the unchurched may be somewhat overdrawn, he is largely correct, for the earliest preaching in Acts was a declaration to the unchurched of the events which had taken place in Christ. On the basis of these events listeners were challenged to respond, as one can observe in Acts.

The preaching tradition preceded the speeches of Acts, according to the New Testament, for John the Baptist and Jesus were both known for this new form of discourse. Their preaching also was an announcement of the deeds of God and a summons for people to respond in repentance. Indeed, Jesus specifically says in his sermon at Nazareth that he is the prophet of Isaiah 61 who has come to "preach good news to the poor." Jesus was thus the evangelist who proclaimed the good news. His preaching was evangelistic preaching, and his announcement was the basis for his call to repentance.

Evangelistic Preaching and Preaching from Texts

Does evangelistic preaching preclude the tradition of expository preaching? It is likely that the two kinds of preaching have been regarded as mutually exclusive because expository preaching is confused with the explaining of the text, often in verse-by-verse fashion. These explanations of the text in commentary style are scarcely proclamatory or evangelistic. However, the essence of biblical preaching is not the explanation of the text, but the re-presentation of the text. The task of expository preaching is to "do what the text does." The many genres of scripture "do" a variety of things. They give ethical instruction, offer praise, record history, and give prophetic oracles, for example. To "preach the Bible biblically," in the words of Leander Keck, is to reproduce the impact of the literature in question.

Much of the literature of the Bible is evangelistic in nature. Thus to preach this literature with fidelity to its intent is to preach evangelistically. The four gospels provide a rich example of the evangelistic preaching of the early church. This new literature, which had no parallel in antiquity, is evidence of the "new speech" which the Christ event brought into being. Very early in the history of the early church the word "gospel," which had been the term used for the "good news" of Christian preaching, came to be used for this genre of literature. Early Christians recognized the distance which separated these gospels from ancient biography, and described them as gospels because they presented the gospel. Their evangelistic intent is to be seen in the conclusion to John's gospel, where the author says, "Jesus did many other signs. . . which are not written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you might have life in his name." This statement of intent might have been used for all of the four gospels. Their authors were evangelists, not biographers. Thus to "do what the text does" in preaching from the gospels is to engage in evangelistic preaching.

This evangelistic impact of the gospels was suggested recently in Thomas Long's **Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989). He recalls seeing a man recite, in dramatic fashion, the whole of the Gospel of Mark. The impact of this presentation was, Long says, that

at various times I found myself siding with one character or another, but my overall impression was that I was in the presence of a very vigorous, very misunderstood, very roughedged, very Markan Jesus. The skillful reaction of Marks' storytelling genius allowed this powerful and in many ways threatening

Jesus to stand forth, and I was confronted with precisely the issues that lie at the heart of Mark's gospel: Is that the "Christ, Son of God?" Do I understand him? Is it possible to understand him? Would I follow him to the death? What will happen if I do? If I don't?

The cumulative impact of a gospel is to present the portrait of Jesus as the one who brings good news and who continues to live and summon men and women to obedience.

The narratives, particularly the synoptic gospels, are episodic in nature, composed of smaller units which contain their own plots portraying the good news brought by Jesus. The miracle stories, for example, were not only accounts of what Jesus had done in the past, but what Jesus continues to do for those who hear the message. G. R. Beasley - Murray correctly wrote in **Preaching the Gospel from the Gospels**, that these subplots served the purposes of evangelistic preaching. One can imagine, for example, the story of the woman with the issue of blood. The listeners identify with her plight as she approaches Jesus. The narrator's eyes are on her as she touches Jesus "by faith" and is healed. Beasley - Murray asks,

Cannot we hear the preacher's voice in this narrative? Every detail of her sufferings and of the unavailing efforts of others to help is significant. When she turns to the Lord she is rewarded: she is saved, by faith. We see here how a healing miracle has been made, simply by the terms employed, an illustration of the power of the crucified and risen lord to set men free from their sins.

Form criticism has helped to realize that the gospels are not biography, but preaching. The listener is asked to identify with those in the story whose lives are transformed through their encounter with Jesus. Thus to "preach the Bible biblically" is to preach the gospel narratives in such a way that listeners realize that the power of Jesus continues to transform lives.

Although the gospel narratives are our primary source for evangelistic preaching, other New Testament documents serve the purposes of evangelism well. The book of Acts, for example, is written to demonstrate to Theophilus (and many others) that the Christian movement cannot be stopped. The triumphalist mood of Acts undoubtedly served to confirm for Christians and convince inquirers that this movement lived by the power of God. The many conversion stories indicate that the Christian message calls for a response. Many of the subplots of Acts also ask us to identify with the characters whose lives are changed

by their hearing of the Christian message. Luke does not cease to be an evangelist when his gospel comes to a close, for Acts is also an evangelistic work. In Acts, as in the gospels, men and women are faced with a decision about the Christian message. Readers of Acts are faced with the same decision.

Although Paul's epistles are written to those who are already converted, they contain frequent references to Christian preaching. In I Corinthians 15:1-3, for example, he reminds the Corinthians of the preaching which they first heard. Throughout the epistles he returns to the word of his preaching (cf. II

Cor. 4:5) in order to reaffirm the content of Christian preaching (cf. Romans 10:9, 10). Paul recognized that the content of his evangelistic preaching had to be consistently reaffirmed in order that his communities might maintain their orientation.

The New Testament offers numerous models for evangelistic preaching, which comes to us through a variety of literary forms. These examples of evangelistic preaching demonstrate that biblical preaching will also be evangelistic in nature. Such preaching not only addresses the unchurched, but reaffirms basic commitments for Christians.