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The Personal Nature of Preaching

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PREACHING IS A PERSONAL event. Obviously, it involves the individual preparation and presentation by a minister or speaker. However, preaching also includes the Bible as a central source. This source comes from and provides a basis for the believing community. The preaching event is also personal for the members of the congregation. They are not simply receptors of the preacher's words based on a biblical text. The congregation is also involved personally in how each individual interprets the words and the text. What is said in the text, what is said in the sermon, and the listener's response comprise parts of each one's testimony. Anna Carter Florence defines testimony as "both a narration of events and a confession of belief: we tell what we have seen and heard, and we confess what we believe about it."¹ Testimony runs throughout the Bible, preaching, and the congregation. It is in this interchange of text, preacher, and listener that not just one testimony develops but many testimonies are present.

1. Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, xiii.

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The Bible is the witness of faith communities that has been shared for generations, the testimonies of the ones who have come before us. The stories of the Bible convey the journey of faith that the believing communities experienced, and handed down through both oral and written traditions. James A. Sanders calls this the canonical process and includes not only the development of the written text but also the intertextuality of the text and the unrecorded hermeneutics that are part of the development of the canon.² The human element of the text should not be denied. Manfred T. Baruch believes that the nature of Scripture includes both divine inspiration and human reception.

This means that the Bible, despite the limitation of the human writers—which include the possibility of misunderstanding, mishearing, or only partially hearing and understanding the revelatory speaking and acting of God—is trustworthy and perfectly sufficient for the redemptive, life-and-world-transforming purpose for which God inspired it.³

In the process of developing the Biblical story the writers used various literary methods, wrote in a particular culture, and developed their testimonies. These testimonies were not intended to simply report past events, but instead they served as a means to provide hope for future generations. In his essay, “Story and History in Biblical Theology,” James Barr emphasizes that the narrative in the Old Testament is closer to story than it is to history. Borrowing a term from Hans Frei, he calls biblical narratives “history-like.”⁴ He does not deny that the narratives have any relation to history. Instead, he sees story as moving in and out of history but not relying purely on history. He continues in his essay, “Historical Reading and Theological Interpretation,” to provide the purpose of biblical narrative.

2. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 61–62. See also Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 21–45.

3. Brauch, *Abusing Scripture*, 23.

4. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 8–12.

He believes that the narratives were not written primarily out of an interest in the past; they were written for a quite different reason:

- 1) They can be written to provide pictures of the promises of God which will come to pass in the future.
- 2) Even if their literal purpose concerns the past, their theological function and purpose may be directed toward the future.⁵

Thus, Barr maintains that the biblical writers are not viewed as writing mere “records” of past events, but instead they are seen as writing “paradigms” for the present that point to the future.⁶ Sanders refers to this as the “adaptability” of the text. While the text provides a tradition, it also has the ability to be adapted to the readers on sociological setting.

The primary characteristic of canon, therefore, is its adaptability. Israel’s canon was basically a story adaptable to a number of different literary forms, adaptable to the varying fortunes of the people who found their identity in it, adaptable to widely scattered communities themselves adjusting to new or strange idioms of existence but retaining a transitional identity, and adaptable to a sedentary or migratory life.⁷

The adaptability of the text also allows for disagreement over the meaning of the text. Being personal, a testimony of what one sees and hears in the text, can lead to differences in meaning with others. These differences can be found both in the text and in the interpretation of the text. Walter Brueggemann refers to this as “testimony” and “counter-testimony.” He speaks of a “second listening community” in Old Testament theology:

Thus the enterprise of Old Testament theology is put, I believe inescapably, in a situation where exposition is always conducted in the presence of two audiences.

5. Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 36.

6. Ibid. See also Barr, “Some Thoughts on Narrative, Myth, and Incarnation.” Barr states, “The motivation of much Israelite storytelling was not to discuss or to relate how things had been long ago but to provide accounts of things as they now are or to provide paradigms for future hope.”

7. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 19.

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In the first instant, exposition is directed at the self-understanding, self-discernment, and authorization of the community that begins in assent to this text. . . (and) a second listening community: the larger public that is willing to host many alternative construals of reality.⁸

This “alternative construal of reality” is not limited to the text, but can also be found in the minister’s interpretation of the text in the sermon and the hearer’s interpretation of the sermon and text.

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How one interprets the biblical text is also personal. Often I hear the frustration of my students when I teach hermeneutics—“I just want to study the Word!” However, when we come to study the Bible we do not come to it *de nova*—with nothing. To simply say “the text means what the text means” is often a one-dimensional understanding of the Bible. Sadly, often we want it to mean *what we want it to mean*. When hearing, reading, and interpreting the text, we bring our own selves to the text, both the preacher and the congregation. This includes:

- 1) *Our culture*, which includes how we were raised and where we were raised;
- 2) *Our beliefs*, based on our faith development and maturity;
- 3) *Our personality*, and our understanding of the role of personality and how we view the world;
- 4) *Our prejudices*, a pre-judgment of the text, already knowing what we want the Scripture to say.

Every time one studies the Bible, he or she is making decisions concerning the interpretation of the text based on these and other factors. Just as the biblical writers could misunderstand, mishear, or only partially hear and understand “the revelatory speaking and acting of God,” so can the minister in interpreting the text. Craig Dykstra believes that in the life of the congregation we often engage

8. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 87.

in “socially acceptable (indeed, socially celebrated) patterns of self destruction.” This includes the minister and preaching. People can tend to manipulate others to serve their own purpose and achievement. In doing so, it destroys what a person needs most—unconditional love—and the church has to be a place of unconditional love. This requires giving up our own “self-security”(achievement [overcoming chaos] made on our own) for faith (trusting God for security [who has overcome chaos]).⁹

Students are taught methods of exegesis and hermeneutics in order to discern the meaning of a given text. Often such work emphasizes the historical nature of the text, what a text *meant*. However, hermeneutics should also emphasize what a text *means*, how the text is adaptable to the current situation. My students often find difficulty in determining what a text *means*. Several reasons can be given for this problem of application including a lack of knowledge of current events, fear of making an incorrect interpretation, going against what they have been taught either in church or in school, and misjudging the current situation.

A challenge that faces both the seasoned minister and the student is being able to apply the appropriate word for the appropriate situation. One characteristic both true and false prophets shared in common in the Old Testament was that they both said, “Thus saith the Lord,” claiming divine sanction for their words. Again testimony and counter-testimony can be found in sermons throughout the ages. In a study of preaching in the pro-slavery south, James O. Farmer states: “Thus it was a simple matter for Southern churchmen to conceive of the slavery debate as a struggle between pious Christian orthodoxy and the modern ideology they came to call rationalism, with the soul of American society at stake.”¹⁰ Social issues, including gay rights, are currently being contested in churches. Church leaders from both sides debate the “proper biblical understanding” of the text, claiming others use an inappropriate hermeneutic.¹¹

9 Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 14, 86–87.

10. Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, 206.

11. Allen, “Baptists Split on NC Gay Marriage Ban.”

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The critically studied text needs to be applied to the context of the faith community. James A. Sanders states:

The Bible, whatever canonical content, has its true *Sitz im Leben* in church or synagogue, not the scholar's study. The Bible has tremendous value, as archaeologists and other historians have shown, for reconstructing history; and it has other secular values. But it has another dimension that gives it a qualitative difference from being only a source book. Despite its considerable pluralism it came out of early believing communities over a two-thousand year period and it still belongs there.¹²

He believes the emphasis on the Enlightenment in biblical studies has locked the text in the past—"chained to the scholar's desk"¹³—and views the responsibility of the minister to be like the beadle "who carries the critically studied Bible procession back to the church lectern from the scholar's study."¹⁴ A similar image is used by Thomas Long: the preacher as "witness."¹⁵ Long states that the preacher "theologically" comes "from *within* the community of faith and not *to* it from the outside."¹⁶

I first became aware of the personal nature of preaching in reading *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* by John Claypool. The book is a collection of sermons preached by Claypool that deal with the diagnosis of acute leukemia and the eventual death of his ten-year old daughter Larua Lue. In the sermons Claypool bore his own personal and family struggles. Yet the sermons are not simply focused on him, but are a journey of faith that he invited his congregations to travel with him. This style of preaching is called confessional preaching. In *The Preaching Event*, Claypool states: "We will make our greatest impact in preaching when we dare to make available

12. *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 193.

13. *Ibid.*, 157.

14. Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 20.

15. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*.

16. *Ibid.*, 10.

to the woundedness of others what we have learned through honest grappling with our own woundedness.”¹⁷ How the congregation receives the testimony of the sermon can also vary from acceptance to rejection. Part of the risk of testimony is that others may reject what is said.¹⁸ Writing in the preface to *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, Claypool shares:

As one would expect, sermons of this nature evoked a variety of response. Some people were frankly offended at the notes of ambiguity and anger which I openly acknowledged. They obviously felt that preachers were to deal with “answers” and not “questions.” One seminary professor even murmured that the third sermon bordered on heresy. At the same time, many other people acknowledged being helped by some, if not all, of these words.¹⁹

The beadle, the witness, and confessional preaching together provide an image of the preacher’s role in the delivery of the sermon. However, what of the experience, the testimony of the congregation—better yet, what of the testimonies of the congregation? The congregation, like the minister comes to the sermon with its own baggage—culture, education, personality, and prejudice. The listeners have their own stories of faith and their own questions. Those who were a part of the “Listening to the Listener” project noted: “People who regularly hear sermons in a congregation do not hear sermons in a vacuum.”²⁰

How does the congregation relate to the text and the sermon? Just as the text and the minister have a context, so does each member of the congregation. The preacher is taught not only to exegete the text but also to exegete the congregation, to know the congregation. This includes knowing the way people learn,²¹ their

17. Claypool, *The Preaching Event*, 86–87.

18. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, 3. Long says that “speaking about faith in public always runs the risk of offense or even social rejection,” *ibid.*

19. Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 14–15.

20. McClure, et al., *Listening to the Listener: Homiletical Case Studies*, 6.

21. Troeger and Everding, *So That All Might Know*.

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personalities,²² and even their cultural contexts.²³ It would be difficult to try to address each situation in every sermon, still an understanding of the congregation aids in both the preparation and delivery of the sermon.

While there are ways for the minister to better know the congregation, how can the congregation share its own testimony? The call and response style has long been associated with African-American preaching.²⁴ In an interesting turn on the call and response, some churches are having members text questions during the sermon that the pastor answers at the end of the message.²⁵ Other churches host a “pastor chat,” often after the service, where members can discuss the pastor’s sermon. However, these still center on the pastor and his or her interpretation of the text and delivery of the sermon. One way, advocated by John S. McClure, allows people to become a part of the sermon preparation process, what he calls collaborative preaching.²⁶ This method seeks to involve the congregation and community in the sermon development and delivery process through work groups that meet regularly with the pastor. Another way to allow the congregation to participate in the personal is to teach the members how to each share his or her testimony, what has been seen and heard and believed.²⁷

CONTINUING THE DISCUSSION

The following essays continue the discussion of *Preaching and the Personal*. In the next chapter, “Preaching and the Personal,” Anna Carter Florence continues the concept of testimony that she writes about in her book, *Preaching as Testimony*. She reminds her students that “God may be the subject (of the sermon—mine), but

22. Baab, *Personality Type in Congregations*.

23. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*; Dietrich and Luz, *The Bible in a World Context*.

24. Crawford, *The Hum*.

25. Charles, “Thumb Wars.”

26. McClure, *The Round-Table Pulpit*.

27. Daniel, *Telling It Like It Is*.

you, the preacher, will be laid bare in the sermon.” She speaks about the concept of “the logic of *leiros*” found in Luke 24:11 and how it should affect the preacher.

Ruthanna B. Hooke addresses the personal element of preaching in, “The Personal and Its Other in the Performance of Preaching.” Applying performance theory to preaching, she speaks to how the person of the preacher is strongly present in the preaching event.

Walter Brueggemann, in his essay, “The Risk of Testimony,” uses readings from Second Isaiah to “break the silence,” both in the biblical context and in the modern day situation.

John S. McClure speaks to the rise of reception-oriented homiletics, the process of receiving and using the sermon by the congregation, in his chapter, “Collaborative Preaching and the Bible: Toward a Practical Theology of Memory.”

The next two essays deal with how the personal crosses cultural boundaries. First, Valerie Bridgeman Davis provides an introduction to Womanist theory in biblical interpretation in her essay, “It Ain’t Necessarily So’: Resistance Preaching and Womanist Thought.” David Cortés-Feuntes offers a primer on the rise of preaching from a Latino/a perspective in his essay, “Liberating Preaching: Hispanic Hermeneutics and Homiletics: Collaborative and Contextual Approaches to Preaching.” (A bibliography of recent works in Hispanic Hermeneutics and Homiletics is provided in Appendix A.)

The final three chapters provide hermeneutical and homiletical examples of preaching and the personal. Each chapter offers a study of a biblical text, the use of a method of interpretation, and closes with a sermon based on the research. In her essay, “Preaching the Word of John: The Word Made Flesh as Theological and Interpretive Method,” Karoline M. Lewis speaks of the importance of “rereading” the text and focusing on the process of reading and not simply the result of reading. Charles L. Aaron applies the work of Anna Carter Florence to his study of John 12:1–11 in his essay, “Scholars and Soccer Moms: Reflections on Objectivity and Subjectivity in Moving from Text to Sermon.” The final essay by J. Dwayne Howell, “Hearing the Voice of Others: A Collaborative Reading of

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Leviticus 19,” studies the treatment of the immigrant found in Leviticus 19:33 and 34, using a collaborative approach.

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