



PREACHING SOURCE

CHANGING EMPHASES IN CONTEMPORARY PREACHING

GORDON CLINARD | SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY VOL. 4 - SPRING 1962

Evangelicals have agreed that preaching is the central charge of the minister. Preaching has been the secret of evangelical advance. Paul Scherer, in his inaugural address as professor of homiletics at Union Seminary, underlined this conviction.

Jesus preached and Paul preached; and the Christian church marched out, girding up its loins, to take over an Empire. Urban II preached; and the crusades swept, with their pathos and their promise, across Europe into Asia. Luther and Calvin and Knox preached, and the Reformation leaped like tongues of flame at the cords which were still wrapped around human history.[1]

Preaching must be the primary task of the minister.

It is necessary for those of us who believe in the importance of the pulpit to evaluate the changing emphases in contemporary preaching. This article is an effort to set forth the most evident trends in contemporary preaching and to evaluate them briefly for their significance for the evangelical pulpit. These trends may or may not have reached the pulpits of our churches. If not, they may cast light upon either the weaknesses or the strengths of contemporary preaching, dependent upon the evaluation of the trends. At any rate, they, in broad terms, represent the thinking of contemporary scholars who are concerned, either theologically or practically, with preaching.

A New Emphasis on the Importance of Preaching

We may begin by noting that there is a current emphasis on the importance of preaching. H. H. Farmer has called this rediscovery of the importance of preaching “the most central and distinctive trend in contemporary Christian theology”[2] It is seen in many ways—the place given to preaching in theological journalism, the vast number of new books on preaching which rush from the press each year, and the enlarged curriculum for the teaching of preaching in our seminaries.

There are two areas in which the rediscovery of the centrality of preaching has been made: one practical, the other theological. The practical explanation of the trend lies in the reaction which has begun against the decline of preaching. That the pulpit has declined must be acknowledged by all. This is an age in which preaching has been in eclipse. The discrediting of preaching, whether by confession or by sheer neglect, is one of the marks of the era. Against this discrediting reaction has begun.

There are several explanations for the loss of a sense of the primacy of preaching by the modern minister. Not the least of these is the

It is also a potentially dangerous development, since the minister may become no more than a social reformer, an educationalist, an amateur psychologist or psychotherapist, or an executive, whose primary preaching, liturgical, and pastoral responsibilities — in the traditional sense may be submerged.[3]

In his new role the minister may no longer believe that preaching is his most urgent task. He may lose confidence in the sermon and thus lose the first essential of great preaching. That this has happened is seen in such statements as that of J. S. Dancy, who in the Christian Century said, "The faithful still gather at the appointed hour before the pulpit to submit themselves to their Sunday martyrdom, but none expect less from the sermon than these, except the man who is preaching it" (May 11, 1932, p. 603). Another writer has told of attending a Sunday afternoon service in Edinburgh, in which the minister was preaching to a congregation of some twenty-five persons. In the midst of his fifteen-minute sermon, the preacher himself yawned! Preaching had lost its wonder for him, and so it has for many.[4]

It may not be that the minister actually believes that preaching is secondary—his new role seems to force such a conclusion upon him. The activism which dominates the minister's life forces preaching to the fringe. He frankly has no time to preach, or at least he does not take time. He finds his congregation more demanding and more complex. His people require more and more of him as a specialist in many areas. His denomination expects more of him as an ever increasing "program" is imposed upon him. He feels that he is judged on an almost purely materialistic basis—budgets, numbers, buildings, statistics. It is no wonder that the ministry is a "perplexed profession." At any rate, in this fast and furious life, if anything suffers, it is preaching.

No one has pointed up the loss of the primacy of preaching more effectively than Samuel W. Blizzard in his recent study of the modern pastorate and its significance for theological education.[5] Dr. Blizzard has found that the average minister graduates from his seminary believing that the role of the ministry is as follows: preacher, pastor, priest, teacher, organizer, administrator. But, subjected to the realistic work of the pastorate, he finds that he spends his time thus: administrator, pastor, preacher, priest, organizer. In other words the pastor is spending most of his time in an area of work which he least enjoys and in which he feels least effective. The result of this for preaching is seen in Blizzard's discovery that the average time devoted to sermon preparation is thirty-six minutes per day, while the time consumed in stenographic work alone averages an hour and four minutes daily.

The minister's new role need not result in a decline in preaching, but the perplexity and the activism which have accompanied it have brought some to the conviction or the forced conclusion that preaching is not significant.

The decline in preaching may also be accounted for by a liturgical emphasis which insists on questioning the place of the sermon as an act of worship. Praise and prayer and the celebration of the sacrament have often been regarded as acts of genuine worship in which men are in direct touch with God, while the sermon has been relegated to a secondary category—reflections, appeals, exhortations issuing from man. In such an interpretation of worship preaching is less than the biblical idea of God speaking through a man. In such an atmosphere, the importance of the pulpit has declined.

It must also be admitted that preaching has suffered in this generation because of the minister's failure to communicate with the contemporary mind. He has often seemed ignorant of the world in which he lives. Either he has failed to speak in language which makes the gospel relevant and challenging to the contemporary mind, or in his attempt to be relevant, he has missed the eternal soul hungerers of men, and preaching has been discredited by the masses as unimportant.

Whatever the reasons, when asked to make a choice as to the relative importance of the functions of the modern minister, many laymen and ministers do not think of preaching as a primary task. It is, then, a time of "retreat from preaching." Against this practical background there has begun a new evaluation of preaching which proposes to return it to its significant and sacred place in the work of the preacher.

Thus, the new emphasis on the importance of preaching becomes theological. In the current trend toward biblical theology prime place is given to preaching. Much of this emphasis is a reinterpretation of the Reformation and biblical concepts of preaching, and is, in summary, a belief that the word of God cannot be separated from its proclamation. The gospel is a preached gospel. Preaching is a redemptive event in contemporary time. Preaching is a part of the "encounter."

The emphasis is primary with neo-orthodoxy. Barth, thinking of preaching as a sacrament, presents it as the "event" toward which the church bells toll on Sunday morning.

becomes fraught with meaning, when it is a preaching of the word of God. It is simply a truism that there is nothing more important, more urgent, more helpful, more redemptive . . . there is nothing, from the viewpoint of heaven or earth, more relevant to the real situation than the speaking and the hearing of the Word of God in the originative and regulative power of its truth...[6]

It is no wonder that to Barth preaching is both the greatest presumption and the greatest glory of men.

Other theologians write of preaching in much the same way. H. H. Farmer says,

Preaching is that divine, saving activity in history, which began two thousand years ago in the advent of Christ and in His personal relationships with men and women . . . now focusing on me, confronting me, as a person indissolubly bound up with other persons at this present time.[7]

T. Forsythe writes, "With preaching Christianity stands or falls because it is the declaration of the Gospel... It is the Gospel prolonging and declaring itself." [8]

Neo-orthodox theologians are joined by adherents of Bultmann in identifying preaching as the redemptive deed. Bultmann himself affirms that "the salvation-occurrence is nowhere present except in the act of preaching." [9] His note of existentialism brings him to assert that the salvation-occurrence continues to take place in the preaching of the Word. Thus, the demythologizers have found a new incentive to preaching in their effort to make biblical "myth" have existential meaning.

The influence of theological thought is easily seen in current writings in homiletics. No man has been of greater importance to contemporary homiletic literature than has Donald G. Miller. He defines preaching thus:

To preach is not merely to stand in a pulpit and speak, no matter how eloquently and effectively, nor even to set forth a theology, no matter how clearly it is stated nor how worthy the theology, but to become a part of a dynamic event wherein the living, redeeming God reproduces his act of redemption in a living encounter with men through the preacher. True preaching is an extension of the Incarnation into the contemporary moment, the transfiguration of the Cross and the Resurrection from ancient facts of a remote past into living realities of the present.[10]

To Miller, to preach is to effect a deed. Basing his conviction on such scripture as 2 Corinthians 5:20 and Galatians 4:19, and upon the deed of redemption in which the kerygma centers, he affirms, "a sermon is an act wherein the crucified, risen Lord personally confronts men either to save or to judge them." [11] And again, "what the priest vainly *tries* to do in the mass, our pulpits are given us to *do*." [12]

Other writers in the field reflect the same theology. I. T. Jones states, "Preaching may be, should be, and at its best will be, a redemptive deed." [13] Richard R. Caemmerer, in his refreshing study of preaching, reflects the same note,

Preaching does more than tell of this gift of life. It gives it. Through preaching God tells of His life to the world, but more: through preaching God gives Himself to the world. Hence the preacher is God's tool to restore God's life in people. Preaching utters words. Yet when it is truly preaching, it is the Word of God to man and the power of God at work in man.[14]

The theological trend which is prevalent thus serves to give new emphasis to the importance of preaching. If this is in any wise preaching, who can relegate it to a secondary role? If preaching is really a part of God's redemptive activity, it is the most important task in the world. It deserves the minister's best thought, his most diligent effort, his complete consecration. Thus speaks theology. One does not have to be neo-orthodox to express gratitude for those who have helped to make preaching significant. Their work furnishes a wholesome incentive to return to the concept that God has ordained that preaching is a vital part of his plan to redeem man. Preaching must not be taken lightly!

A New Emphasis on the Theological Content of Preaching

It is obvious from the theological emphasis just discussed that much which passes for preaching would not be so considered by those who think of it as a "redemptive deed." Preaching only occurs, so far as they are concerned, when "the deed" is preached, when there is

kerygma and the *didache*. With some, preaching is confined to the proclamation of the *kerygma*. Thus, most of the current literature in homiletics emphasizes the *what* of preaching—much more than the *how* of preaching. Content, rather than form, has become the most important object of instruction in homiletic texts. Sharp evidence of the new emphasis may be found in a casual study of any lectureship on preaching which has extended over a number of years. The Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale, for example, were almost exclusively devoted to form at the beginning of the century, but the mechanics of preaching have been almost completely abandoned in the last twenty years.

There is much about this trend for which we can be grateful. In a day when a great deal of preaching is void of theological content, it is mandatory that the minister be reminded of the essential content of his message. Theodore Wedel laments that the modern preacher, feeling inadequate in theology, has fallen back upon the homiletic tradition of the era of non-theological liberalism and has permitted his sermons to become dominated by the “ought to” theme, with the social and the ethical.^[15] The tendency has been, he says, to omit the idea that these follow regeneration. In a day when positive thinking sermons have become one of the symbols of the new face of American religion, any book of best sermons will demonstrate the need for theological preaching.

E. C. Rust points up the fact that “far too long our preaching, at all levels, has been remarkable for the absence of the doctrinal note.”^[16] And lest it is felt that the criticism is directed only toward the liberal, he adds,

It applies also to the more conservative and evangelical in our midst. If the extreme liberal has watered down the Gospel until its original content has been almost lost, the conservative has frequently surrounded his gospel by outmoded verbiage and semantic nothingness. If the liberal has so stressed experience that his religion has lost any authoritative and dogmatic norm, the evangelical has so emphasized the emotional that his religion has replaced the central emphases of our most holy faith by sentimental catchwords and emotional mists.^[17]

A return to theological preaching is essential if the minister is truly to speak to his day. Contrary to those who have seemed to believe that the preaching of theology would fail to communicate with the modern mind, the preacher must center his communication in doctrine—doctrine expressed in understandable language, but doctrine nonetheless. This is the day when theology lurks in the laboratories of the nuclear scientist, intrudes into the world of the statesman, gets entangled in the roadside philosophy of the truck driver, finds its way, ever so full of blasphemy, into the lines of the modern ballad. This, of all days, is “a great time for preachers.” This of all days, when man’s basic problems are known to be theological, problems of insecurity, grim reality, human bankruptcy, materialistic dogmatism, and world consciousness, the preacher must proclaim an authoritative and cosmic message. The message must be redemption centered. For such an emphasis we can be glad.

But there are dangers in the trend. For one thing, often there is too sharp a distinction drawn between the *kerygma* and *didache*. Weatherspoon’s emphasis at this point is needed and wholesome:^[18] in the New Testament there is not so great a difference between preaching and teaching as some want to make. Rather, there are many functions of preaching, as demonstrated in the several words which are translated “preach,” and teaching is one of these functions. There is a need to center our preaching in the *kerygma*, but not to the neglect of the ethical and therapeutic. Rather, these themes must be theologically grounded and reinforced.

There is also a danger that the emphasis on content to the almost total neglect of form may seriously weaken the minister’s skill in the communication of his message. The importance of communication must not be forgotten. H. Grady Davis has done homiletic literature a great service in his development of the thesis that content or idea without form is impossible.^[19] The error in much teaching of preaching, he says, is not in an emphasis on form but the mechanical insistence that all sermons must follow the same form. This we need to see, but the importance of the basic principles of sermonic form must not be misplaced in the revolt against mechanics which is prevalent in homiletic literature today.

A NEW EMPHASIS ON BIBLICAL PREACHING

If Farmer is correct and the rediscovery of the significance of preaching is the important development in modern theology then it can surely be said that the most important development in preaching is a new emphasis on the centrality of biblical preaching. The trend is inherent in much of the theological interpretation already discussed and, with varying interpretations, receives the support of men from John Knox to Andrew Blackwood.

a Scottish minister, who upon his return from a tour of American churches, said,

The strangest thing in the American church is that there are no Bibles in the pews. Indeed, I have looked in vain in a vestry, or "office," as it is rightly called ... It is the total absence of the Biblical background . . . that makes the great type of preaching in America possible. Topical preaching flourishes, and preachers almost invariably tend to degenerate into "wisecrackers" and "smart guys," or as we would call them, "bounders," who are more anxious to impress folk with their own cleverness than to make God visible and to reveal God's Son, which is the real end and aim of preaching.[21]

Biblical preaching has declined—of that any observer can be certain.

There are explanations of this decline. On the one hand there were certain inherent weaknesses in much expository preaching. It was often separated from the needs of the congregation, since it was done in the purely historical sense. It was often presented without sermonic unity. It was often identified with a stereotyped form of public exegesis. As a homily it was often done as a lazy substitute for unified sermons, when there was no time to adequately prepare.

Historically, the biblical sermon reached its greatest decline under the influence of such men as Harry Emerson Fosdick, who in the early years of the century, began to think of preaching as problem-centered. Such men insisted that preaching made no difference if it was concerned with historical facts only and made no contact with the contemporary mind. The ideal method became one of pulpit counseling, of problem-centered preaching, and, as a result, the followers of Fosdick and others were seemingly left with a choice—be biblical or be relevant, for you cannot be both. Such influence upon the modern evangelical has been great, though often unrecognized. These facts, combined with a decreasing emphasis upon the biblical languages and the resultant inability of many ministers to do exegesis, have resulted in an era of topical preaching. In this framework a new emphasis on biblical preaching has emerged, an emphasis which seeks to retain all that was good in the style of the topical sermon and combine with it a truly biblical basis.

The last sentence expresses the distinctive in contemporary biblical preaching. The concept has received a new definition, a definition which primarily emphasizes content rather than form. When Donald Miller asks the question, "What is biblical preaching?" he begins his answer with a protest against all definitions of biblical sermons which stress a certain rigid form of development. Thus, he decries all definitions of expository preaching, including that of John A. Broadus, which emphasize the length of the passage, detailed analytical form, the explanatory method of presentation, and the consecutive handling of the passage under consideration. His definition, rather, is that, "Expository preaching is an act wherein the living truth of some portion of Holy Scripture, understood in the light of solid exegetical and historical study and made a living reality to the preacher by the Holy Spirit, comes alive to the hearer as he is confronted by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit in judgment and redemption." [22] Notice the emphasis on content rather than form. Biblical preaching is the communication of the truth of a passage, historically exegeted, no matter what form it takes. In short, biblical preaching simply means that the substance of one's preaching is drawn from the Bible, and to Miller this refers to a given biblical passage. He will countenance no preaching which is not biblical, but this has little to do with homiletic form.

Andrew Blackwood, greatly influential in shaping a new trend toward biblical preaching, has a similar approach. He states, "an expository sermon means the interpretation of life today, in light that comes from God today, largely through a certain portion of Holy Writ." [23] Though he does not omit the idea that such a sermon be based on a longer passage of scripture, he insists that it is not primarily an explanation of scripture, that it must have as much unity as any other sermon, and that, therefore, the expositor must be selective. Again the emphasis is not upon homiletic form. The important thing is the communication of the message of the passage. The form may be infinitely varied.

A newer work on preaching, Richard Caemmerer's *Preaching for the Church*, makes virtually the same approach. [24] The biblical sermon is defined as one whose content is taken from a biblical passage, no matter how topically it may be developed as to form, and the topical sermon is defined as being one whose content is taken from a subject, no matter how much biblical material is included in the formal development of the sermon. Such topical preaching is approved because of its biblical flavor.

The trend is rewarding for many reasons. It calls preaching back to its biblical roots. It challenges to the most thorough exegesis and exposition. It underscores the use of the Bible as the route to authority, breadth, variety, and relevance in preaching. It offers forms of biblical preaching which conserve the unity and freshness of topical sermons. It affords freedom to the minister who seeks creativity in biblical preaching and who may be reactionary toward certain heretofore mechanical necessities. It offers, in most writers, a new insight

Two dangers seem evident. It is possible, first, for biblical preaching to be so generally defined as to continue to be more topical than biblical. Second, in the name of the vital importance of existential meaning for the hearer, in the name of relevance, the Bible's importance as history may be perverted. In this second danger the final trend in contemporary preaching is involved.

A NEW EMPHASIS ON MAKING PREACHING RELEVANT TO HUMAN NEED

The hearer has rightly emerged as the object of the pulpit's voice. He has become "king" for the preacher. The sermon, whatever its homiletic construction, is always to be preached to human need. And if it is to meet human need it must be intelligible to the hearer. The task of preaching is to communicate the gospel in such relevant and simple terms that the contemporary world can see it as it is. If sermons are not to be the "dagger in the heart of the evangelical church," they must make a vital difference to those who hear them. Communication in preaching is a foremost trend of the day.

To some relevance is a matter of theology. To the neo-orthodox the secret of communication is in the encounter itself. It is certainly not preaching so as to please hearers and to be accepted by them. It is rather preaching which runs the risk, yea which faces the inevitable fact, that when men are faced by God in judgment, there will be much rebellion against the message. Communication is in the encounter.

With Bultmann and his followers the encounter takes place when the Bible comes to have existential meaning for the hearer. Thus, the task of the theologian and the preacher is to demythologize the New Testament that its meaning may have relevance for the contemporary hearer. It is to discover spiritual meaning in pre-scientific thought forms and to discover the true otherworldly in the "terms of this world," in which "myth" the Bible was written. Thus, for these preachers the only important question in biblical interpretation is existential, "what is the meaning of this event or doctrine for me?"

Much theology of relevance has been expressed in books on preaching. When it is combined with a growing trend toward the use of allegory it defines relevance only in terms of the "real meaning" expressed in historical symbols, which may or may not be historically true. The great danger of this approach to preaching is that it uses many terms which are quite familiar and essential to true biblical preaching but which mean something quite different for one whose allegiance is to historical exegesis. The clearest example of this occurs in John Knox's *The Integrity of Preaching*.^[25] After an excellent discussion of the need for, nature of, and advantages of biblical preaching, the author gives an example of a biblical sermon. In discussing the healing of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10 he states that three types of sermons are possible on the text. One will find proof that Jesus was Messiah—this he admits is close to the text "Son of David" but since it is not relevant, it is not a true sermon no matter how true! The second sermon will emphasize the compassion of Jesus in healing a blind man—this he rejects on the basis that, though it is relevant, it makes shallow use of the text for it was not remembered by the Christian community for this reason. The third sermon will seek an existential interpretation. It is to treat the text not as a past event but as an event in our own history. "We are blind Bartimaeus. Christ calls to us, 'What do you want me to do for you?' It is we who answer, or would answer, 'Master, let me receive my sight.' It is obvious that only when the text is understood in some such way is it deeply relevant."^[26] Such is a clear illustration of what relevance means to those who think of it so as to discount the historical in favor of a spiritualized effort to find true meaning in the "myth" of scripture. Seen from this approach the current trend toward the contemporary is alarming.

But for others the matter of relevance is a matter of homiletic style. Having full faith in the authority of the Bible, these agree with James Stewart,

It is one thing to demythologize the message of the Scriptures to suit the canons of an existentialist philosophy and the assumptions of modern scientific man. But it is quite another thing to recognize that here God is coming forth to encounter us with incomparable blessings in his hand.^[27]

These believe that to be relevant one must be biblical in the historical sense, for revelation was made to men who, because they were a part of the human family, had our needs and longings. What God did for them he reveals himself as wanting to do for modern man. For homileticians of this faith relevance becomes a matter of preaching historical truth in such a contemporary style as to make the Bible become a living word for the present hearer. The modern preacher does well to study the field of communication, to seek clarity and force in language, to make his introductions, titles, and structure contemporary, to make the sermon live with allusions to life, but never at the cost of biblical content.

These, then, are the trends in contemporary preaching—a new sense of the importance of preaching, a new emphasis on theology in

any legitimate emphasis which makes preaching the primary work of the ministry, which centers preaching in the truth, which makes preaching biblical, and which puts into the minister's heart the desire to truly reach the hearts and minds of living men.

References

CATEGORY: JOURNAL ARTICLE

TAGS:

SHARE THIS ARTICLE:



Southwestern Journal of Theology

To download full issues and find more information on the [Southwestern Journal of Theology](https://www.swbts.edu/journal), go to [swbts.edu/journal](https://www.swbts.edu/journal).

[HOME](#) | [ADMISSIONS](#) | [ACADEMICS](#) | [CAMPUS LIFE](#) | [ALUMNI](#)

All content copyright © 2022 Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, Texas. All rights reserved. [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#) | [Privacy Disclaimer](#)