



Preaching and the Pastoral Vocation

SHELDON A. TOSTENGARD

Luther-Northwestern Theological Seminaries, St. Paul, Minnesota

Some young pastors probably wouldn't identify themselves as preachers, at least not to a casual acquaintance. For one thing, the other person might not understand; for another, it just doesn't seem very grand. "Pastor" sounds kindly and gentle. "Theologian" sounds sophisticated and wise. "Minister" has a more respectable ring than "preacher." Not so many people know about Elmer Gantry these days, but nearly everyone is aware of the slick T.V. preachers that reap enormous profits from calling people back to religion. Preaching does not get high marks for respectability in our society. It's understandable that a young pastor would rather be known as "resident theologian" than as "preacher."

The escape, however, is not easy. Older pastors have done so much preaching that they almost have to accept the designation "preacher;" it's just a matter of self defense. They have also had some first-hand experience of the power of the sermon. But even younger clergy, particularly Protestant ones, cannot easily escape the strong emphasis on preaching in their tradition and practice. After all, Jesus came preaching, and we are aware of the oral character of both Testaments. The Reformation put preaching at the center of worship, and the Augsburg Confession defines ordained ministry in terms of preaching and administering the sacraments. An even more convincing argument may be that the people of congregations expect the pastor to preach, and they continue to expect some word from God in the sermon.

And they want to find out and thoroughly understand the answer to this one question, Is it true?—and not some other answer which beats about the bush. Let us not be surprised that this want of theirs seldom or never meets us openly with such urgency as I have indicated. People naturally do not shout it out, and least of all into the ears of us ministers. But let us not be deceived by their silence. Blood and tears, deepest despair and highest hope, a passionate longing to lay hold of that which, or rather of him who, overcomes the world because he is its Creator and Redeemer, its beginning and ending and Lord, a passionate longing to have the word spoken, the word which promises grace in judgment, life in death, and the beyond in the here and now, God's word—that it is which animates our church-goers, however lazy, bourgeois, or com-

monplace may be the manner in which they express their want in so-called real life.¹

More is at stake here than the choice of which elements of ministry a particular pastor may choose to emphasize; vocational identity itself is an issue. One grows weary of endless talk of identity, but there is no question that it is a crucial issue for pastors in our time. It is difficult for a pastor to live with freedom and joy unless there is a clear sense of who the pastor is and what the central duties of ministry are. Congregations may have some basic sense about this issue, but confessional uncertainty and the lure of the prospect of worldly success can push the pastor in all sorts of directions. It is the contention of this essay that the key element in defining the vocational identity of the pastor is preaching. This is in accord with the nature of the gospel, the Protestant tradition, and the Lutheran confessions. The pastor has a certain office, and there are duties other than preaching, but if preaching is at the heart of a pastor's understanding of vocational identity, he or she is on the right track.

I

Once emphasis is placed upon preaching, however, a variety of objections and problems come up; and they are more serious than the fact that being a preacher doesn't seem very grand. There is the hermeneutical question of whether or not an ancient text can speak today. There is the exegetical task of needing to master certain skills in order that the ancient text can be understood. There is the historical, systematic task, for systematic wisdom is imperative if a text is to be properly correlated with modern life. There is the pastoral need to understand this complex world and the people to whom we are to preach. As if this were not enough, there is also the nagging problem of the preacher's authority, and in this country it is most often assumed that the preacher's words are nothing more than the expression of one private opinion among many others. We are so preoccupied with individual freedom that it cannot be otherwise. It is not primarily a matter of preaching appearing to be ineffective, but rather a matter of whether it can be a primary way that God speaks in our world.

Nevertheless, there is another, very practical problem with our identity as preachers; it is the problem of the actual words which we speak and which the congregation hears. The preacher believes that our human words can become the Word of God for the hearer, but we are speaking now of the very words themselves—those words which make up the stuff of our preaching and are also the everyday vehicles for commerce and fraternity among people. Words are the tools of the preacher's trade, and when one compares them with the engines, microscopes, and computers of our present age, they don't seem like much. Preachers are dependent on language—just plain, everyday, marketplace language—and that is a big reason why it's not easy to accept the designation "preacher." There aren't too many things that our pluralistic culture could agree on, but one thing that would come close is the conviction that "talk is cheap." If that is so,

¹Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Harper and Brothers: New York, 1928) 108-109.

then the preacher's talk must be cheap. Parents are often convinced that one important teaching to leave with their children is the conviction that "actions speak louder than words." Actions are something, do something, change things, while words are the weak shadows of distant realities. Gone are the days of a dynamistic conception of language, when a curse was a curse, and a blessing could not be taken back. Christians appear to have accepted culture's verdict on language because in worship it is fashionable to reduce talk of and with God to the most

pedestrian and unadorned prose. Rarely does one hear of the angels and archangels, with all the company of heaven, lauding and magnifying God's glorious name. Certainly words can be cheap, but to suppose that they must be so is a terrible blow to the preacher. They are the tools of the trade, and therefore it seems as though the preacher is like a warrior going into battle with a few puffs of wind rather than the strong weapons that are needed. Why should one want to call oneself a preacher anyway?

Such decline of respect and love for language may be as significant a sign as any of the decay of our culture. And this decline fights relentlessly against the vocational identity of the pastor. Not only does it cause the pastor doubt about the tools of the trade, but it raises grave doubts as to whether God can actually enter the world through words at all. Perhaps one could conclude that God has chosen our human language to enter the world precisely because it is the most unlikely, the weakest, the most unexpected way possible. The preacher's vocational identity is not helped by that, however, for what pastor can function with a consistent sense of language being the most unlikely, the weakest, the most unexpected vehicle for the gospel? That is also bad theology, for when we say that God meets us in the depths and not on the heights, it doesn't mean that he always chooses the poorest way of coming to us. Rather, it means that he comes to us as we are, where we are—creatures gripped by the iron fist of death.

If the vocational identity of the Protestant pastor is rooted in preaching, there can hardly be any greater obstacle to that identity than the erosion of respect for language. An increasing number of scholars are recognizing that this decay is a threat to the character, the vigor, and the quality of our life together.

We can no longer take language for granted as a medium of communication. Its transparency has gone. We are like people who for a long time looked out of a window without noticing the glass—and then one day began to notice this too.²

But many of these same scholars, both in the secular and religious realms, are working mightily to reconstruct and re-establish the meaning and power of language.

In a time when many speak of "mere words" so pejoratively, it may seem almost incredible that "words" would be a means of God's giving himself to us. But over against this disregard for words there is in our time a gathering of concerns and explorations into the meaning of language that has no equal in the history of our civilization. The simple and yet profound act of speaking with one another has become the center for a whole constellation of studies philosophical, theological, biblical, psychological, and practical.³

²Iris Murdoch, *Sartre* (New Haven: Yale University, 1953) 27.

³Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Enid: Phillips University, 1974) 25.

The preacher's vocational identity depends, in large measure, on the degree to which we pay attention to these studies and take their affirmation of language to heart.

II

In order to purge ourselves of the demon of the disregard for language, we need to take a good look at the history of just how this disregard has come into being. Walter Ong, a Roman Catholic professor of English, has provided us with a sound study of the history of the place of language in culture.⁴ His work is central in the brief survey which follows. Lutherans cannot quite be satisfied with most Roman Catholic approaches to this subject because for Catholics the spoken word, when it becomes the word of Christian preaching, is still a signification of something beyond itself rather than the actual reality. Nevertheless, Roman Catholic contributions to this discussion are very important.

Any talk of a time when language was thought to have the power of an action sounds romantic. It may, at first, remind one of the way many cafes are being made over to seem old. However, there was a time when language was thought to have such power. To understand that, and to see how it has been lost, is crucial to preaching and the pastor's vocational identity. Ong calls this period of history the time of "the unrecorded word-oral culture."

The spoken word came first, before writing. In the beginning there was speech, and that speaking had nothing at all to do with writing. It is not easy to think of such a situation. For instance, Ong points out that we persist in judging oral cultures in terms of writing; we call them illiterate or pre-literate. Cultural continuity between their speaking and our writing-speaking is minimized, and it is assumed that our situation is vastly superior. (It would be more accurate to say that writing-speaking is necessary to our culture, and therefore superior.) For us, words are records that can be stored, used, and controlled; thus, they are at their best when written down. But something is also lost when we totally forget that speaking originally had nothing to do with writing, and what is lost is respect and love for the spoken word. Once the spoken word was "something that happens, an event in the world of sound through which the mind is enabled to relate actuality to itself;"⁵ it was a word more congenial to the preacher. Two examples, from among many, can be selected from Ong's work to show the difference between oral cultures and our own: the idea of history, and the use of the manuscript.

Oral culture has no records, and so its history exists in the form of memory, whereas our history exists as a written record. Oral history, in its most formal state, is the epic poem which is sung—an epic which is not detached from, but vital and alive in the present. Written history is somewhat detached from the present, and it can be controlled, even forgotten; but it is capable of maintaining more material. Memory is the key to oral history, and memory helps (i.e., thirty days hath September, etc.), whereas codification is the key to written history. The

⁴Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967).

⁵*Ibid.*, 22.

written record is comprehensive, but not so lively, while the remembered and sung record is a summary, but very engaging and present.

Our contemporary use of the manuscript provides another view of the difference between our culture and oral society. Ong points out that memory, in oral cultures, is never verbatim. Memory in such cultures is very sophisticated, so much so that entire epics can be repeated after only one or two hearings. But these repetitions are never exact. Instead, they are in fundamental accord with the basic subject matter and amplified by certain memory aids. In literate cultures

there is an assumption that if a text is transmitted exactly, then its precise meaning is preserved. Critical study of Scripture has proceeded on this basis, and young preachers, once they have written a sermon manuscript, want to get every word just as it was written.

There are elements in Scripture and church history which reflect oral culture. In the priestly creation story (Genesis 1:1-2:4a), God speaks and the creation comes into being; while in the Yahwistic story (2:4b-3:24), humanity is called to share in the creation by giving the animals their names. For the Old Testament prophets words actually accomplished what they purported; a curse was a curse, and a blessing could not be withdrawn. In the New Testament the word is given a more prominent place than in the Old. Not only is it impossible to understand Jesus apart from his words and the claims made for him, but the designation “Word” and “Son” go together. In Romans 10:14-17 Paul clearly speaks of faith as a matter of speaking and hearing, a gift that comes by way of what we hear. Luther understood faith in this Pauline way and called it an “acoustic” affair. He was even convinced that it would have been better if the Gospels had not been written down.

Oral culture has pretty much disappeared, and it has done so because it is inadequate for certain complexities of society. It cannot maintain a great amount of knowledge; and truth, if lively and present, tends to become typical and general. For instance, a certain character in a poem comes to represent wisdom, honor, or freedom. Ong points out that Plato notices this inadequacy and eliminated poets from the Republic. Learning could no longer be a matter of memorizing the poems; it demanded codification, abstraction, and writing. Nevertheless, oral culture did not suddenly disappear and written culture suddenly emerge with Plato. This change began long before Plato and is still going on. Oral culture was preserved through the Middle Ages by the teaching of rhetoric, and some Christians still memorize Scripture because of their conviction that memory cannot be taken from them.

Recovery of the past is not possible or desirable. What is at stake is an attempt to recover a certain respect for and love of language because it is essential to our life together.

An oral-aural culture...can never get far away from the word as a vocalization, a happening. The expression of truth is felt as itself always an event. In this sense, the contact of an oral culture with truth, vague and evanescent though it may be by some literate standards, retains a reality which literate cultures achieve only reflexively and by dint of great conscious effort. For oral-aural man, utterance remains always of a piece with his life situation. It is never remote. Thus it provides a kind of raw, if circumscribed, contact with actuality and with truth, which literacy and even literature alone can never

give and to achieve which literate cultures must rather desperately shore up with other new resources their more spatialized verbal structures.⁶

For the most part, oral culture has been replaced by what Ong calls the culture of “the de-natured word-alphabet and print.” The curse has been replaced by legal indictments, the promise by the last will and testament, and the epic poet by historians who write carefully documented books. The “word event” has been stopped in time and recorded in space. Signs of this can

already be seen in Sumerian Cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics, forms of picture writing which still exist, in a very sophisticated form, in various Oriental languages. But it was really the discovery of the alphabet which made it possible for writing to replace speaking as a means of communicating important knowledge or valued truth. This discovery took place about 1500 B.C., rather late in the total history of humankind. The process was given another major boost when printing was invented in the 15th century. Ong points out that movable, non-alphabetic type had been in use for some time, providing the basic knowledge for alphabetic type. The invention of printing was delayed, however, because of what scholars assume to be a sense of the possible implications of stopping words in space and time.

The implications of fixing words in print, a matter which we tend not to reflect on, can hardly be overestimated.

The sense of order and control which the alphabet thus imposes is overwhelming. Arrangement in space seemingly provides maximal symbols of order and control, probably because the concepts of order and control are themselves kinesthetically and visually grounded, formed chiefly out of sensory experience involved with space. When the alphabet commits the verbal and conceptual worlds, themselves already ordered superbly in their own right, to the quiescent and obedient order of space, it imputes to language and to thought an additional consistency of which preliterate persons have no inkling. Any script, even picture writing, gives some such sense of order, but no other does so in so radically simplified a fashion. It appears no accident that formal logic was invented in an alphabetic culture.⁷

Printing has changed the very way that we apprehend reality, our sensorium; and how we expect that what is real and true will be apprehended visually. You “can’t believe everything that you hear,” but “seeing is believing.” Studies have shown that it is more devastating for an infant to be born deaf than blind, but we most often suppose that blindness is the worst thing that could happen. The primacy of seeing in our sensorium has also helped to promote the preoccupation with the individual that has been apart of modern life. Speaking and hearing is a community event, whereas seeing is a solitary business. Seeing alienates us from the universe itself. No longer can people hear “the music of the spheres,” but now we can only peer into that icy cold and infinite space in the hope that we will find it friendly. The word, the event in sound, has been fixed in time and space and denatured.

Ong points out that this process culminated in the Enlightenment, and particularly in the philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704).⁸ Consciousness, for Locke,

⁶Ibid., 33.

⁷Ibid., 45.

⁸Ibid., 66-68.

was like a dark room. A “closet wholly shut from light,” with only a few windows to let light in. The windows are sight whereby we apprehend “external visible resemblances or ideas of things without.” Locke compares the process of making complex ideas of the simple ones apprehended by vision to the way many words can be made from the few letters of the alphabet. Society

provided its own criticism of this denatured word. For instance, Swift used books to make fun of books, and it was common for Renaissance authors to criticize their printers. But this critique was like a stick of wood rolling with the tide.

Certainly a negative description of the effects of printing on culture doesn't necessarily reflect a desire to return to an earlier, oral period. Complex society demands complex forms of record keeping. But Christians ought to know that civilization itself has some perversities. One such weakness is the damage that has been done to the spoken word, that primordial event in sound whereby community is created. Some scholars believe that the time is right to recapture a sense of the primacy and the power of language. That is good news for preachers.

Ong calls the present the electronic era, an era when our visually oriented sensorium has been shaken and even changed. One cannot but be amazed at the amount of electronic gadgetry that surrounds us, and most of those machines are capable of making sound. Students can listen to good sermons rather than read them; dentists use recorded music to soothe their anxious patients; and the radio has become popular, even fashionable again. There are enough sound producing machines in most households to crack the plaster if they were all turned on at once. The electronics of our age has given a new emphasis to speaking and hearing.

How can the status of the word in such a world be described? The changes in today's sensorium as a whole have been too complex for our present powers of description, but regarding the fortunes of the word as such one fact is especially noteworthy: the new age into which we have entered has stepped up the oral and aural. Voice, muted by script and print, has come newly alive. For communication at a distance, written letters are supplemented and largely supplanted by telephone, radio, and television. Rapid transportation makes personal confrontation, interviewing, and large-scale meetings or "conventions" possible to a degree unthinkable to early man. Sound has become curiously functional with the development of sonar, which is used even to catch fish for commercial purposes. Sound has become marketable, if indirectly so, through the use of (nonelectric) disk recordings and, even more, through the use of electronic tapes. Recordings and tapes have given sound a new quality, recuperability.⁹

It is also a time when the visual is being intensified as never before. We are surrounded by printed material, and modern cinematography is amazing. The television is always there, waiting for us. The combination of the heightened oral and the intensified visual tends, in a curious way, to go beyond the natural capacities of our sensorium, and it leaves new possibilities open.

For instance, the modern computer is able to store and produce printed information with a speed that is overwhelming. Information is sometimes useless simply because there is so much of it; produced so quickly, it cannot be assimilated by anyone.

⁹Ibid., 88.

lated by anyone. Computers challenge the modern, visually oriented sensorium in two ways. On the one hand, they can take codified speech and turn it into printed information to such an amazing degree that it is out of touch with daily living. When one's whole life is reduced to some

words on a bit of tape, one tends to long for some simple conversation with a good friend. Enough words have been codified and controlled now so as to remind us that writing is not primordial, but speaking is. On the other hand, computer language, and other electronically produced visual stimuli, are so sophisticated, so immediate, that they recapture some of the event character which the word had in oral culture. Printed matter, until the recent past, has produced an impression of sequentiality and causality, but now it may be very immediate and uncontrollable.¹⁰ There is a likeness with the world of speech as event.

Certain contemporary philosophers are adding impetus to the attempt to recapture a sense of the primacy of speaking and hearing. Linguistic philosophy has tended to depreciate language rather than exalt it. The linguists insist that words signify meanings that can be demonstrated as verifiable.¹¹ Such a positivistic approach to language points beyond itself to the objective and verifiable reality. One wonders, for instance, just what sort of positivistic judgment a linguistic philosopher would make on the blessing that Isaac gave to Jacob. Isaac's words are already the blessing, an "event in the world of sound."

Some philosophers have challenged the "linguistic" view of language these days, and one of the foremost among them is Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, language is the fundamental creative reality in life. It is not only expressive of being, but "language precedes man; language is the loudspeaker for being."¹² Speaking and hearing is the way that reality is constituted. Heidegger turned to poetry as the most significant expression of reality. Some scholars have charged him with giving up the honest philosophical quest for truth by writing his essays on the poetry of Hölderlin; but if our thesis about language is correct, it is more likely that his investigations finally drove him to speaking and hearing as the fundamental source of reality.¹³ In Heidegger all sense of language as signification is gone; speaking and hearing is reality itself. While his views might seem extreme to some, and while we really cannot achieve a truly primitive sense of the power of oral discourse, nevertheless, Heidegger's thought helps to open the way for a much greater appreciation of human speech.

III

The task of proclamation is still central for the Protestant pastor. It is central because the gospel is not a postulate about the nature of God, but a saving event. Above all, it is central because Christ has commanded us to preach. This means that our words are the tools of our trade, the primary equipment of our vocational identity. Words can be cheap; pastors, above all, know that. Words do not seem to provide very grand equipment for so noble a work as making the gospel

¹⁰Ibid., 91.

¹¹F. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 32.

¹²Ibid., 36.

¹³Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949) 253ff.

known. There are, however, clear hints that our Lord has chosen wisely when he has chosen to reveal himself in language. Luther understood that. With his usual sense for the commonplace, he noticed the people in the village and saw how important speaking and hearing was in their lives. The whole point is that these earthen vessels which are our words might be quickened by the

Holy Spirit to become the Word of the gospel; but these earthen vessels, however common, are dear and precious.