



A Convictional Vision of Preaching

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FROM TIME TO TIME PREACHERS NEED TO RETREAT FROM THE FRAY, REFLECT ON why and how God uses preaching, and rekindle our faith in the power of the preached word. This sounds easy, but it is not. Preachers typically function as theologians, exegetes, shepherds, administrators, counselors, educators, spiritual guides, and dynamic communicators of the grace, love, and peace of Jesus Christ. While these demanding responsibilities make parish leadership interesting, they make creative reflection on the nature, purpose, and methods of preaching difficult. Given the press of parish life and the relentless return of the sabbath, pastors find it difficult to sharpen our saws and refocus our vision. Without a creative time out, the “burdensome joy” of preaching¹ can become a joyless burden lacking vigor and focus. This article considers several difficulties that bedevil preachers and then draws on the work of H. H. Farmer to develop a convictional vision that can inspire, motivate, and guide effective preaching.

¹James Earl Massey, *The Burdensome Joy of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

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Preaching is an evangelical, sacramental, and pastoral event in which God seeks to encounter and save those who hear the gospel. Preaching is not incidental to the gospel but integral to it. Without preaching, the saving knowledge of God’s redeeming love would simply die out.

I. DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

Whatever else may be said, ultimately preaching is a strange activity. Preaching is strange because its subject matter is inherently strange. At the heart of Christianity is the dogmatic yet utterly mysterious claim that in Jesus Christ, *God* entered human history, took flesh and dwelt amongst us, in a revelation that is unique, final, completely adequate, and wholly indispensable for humanity's salvation.² Consequently, preaching, which proclaims and extends this redemptive event, "is and must remain, a *strange* activity; its strangeness is irreducible, for it is part of the strangeness, the uniqueness of the Christian faith itself."³

Making matters worse, preaching's subject matter is not only strange; it is patently offensive—foolishness to reason, a stumbling block to pride. The homiletical problem is that preaching, like the Christian faith itself, is *sui generis*, making it difficult under the best of circumstances to get much intellectual leverage or perspective on the nature, purpose, methods, and craft of preaching.

The problem is compounded by pressures and distractions coming from at least three directions. Pastors are supposed to be reflective practitioners. However, pastors are too busy visiting the sick, burying the dead, comforting the bereaved, counseling the burdened, cultivating prospective members, meeting with committees, and running about town to devote much time or energy to serious theological reflection on the nature, purpose, methods, strategies, and craft of preaching. Because Sunday rolls around at least twice a week, preaching is quickly reduced to preparing and delivering sermons on the run.

If parish pastors are too busy to reflect on their craft, the yield of academic homiletics has become increasingly arcane and largely irrelevant to the very people who need the academy's help. Several years ago the Lilly Foundation funded a major study of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to determine why this mainline denomination has been losing members and influence for the past 30 years. John McClure's analysis of the situation in homiletics illustrates the distance between the concerns of the academy and the needs of the parish:

Questions regarding an adequate method for preaching in a postmodern environment continue to plague mainstream academic homileticians. Many of these questions are rooted in the postmodern debate concerning the nature and function of religious language. Narrative and phenomenological models of preaching have been promoted by academic homileticians in response to postmodern challenges to the denotive and referential functions of religious language.⁴

If McClure is right, and I suspect he is, then homileticians and preachers not only think about different issues; they speak a different language!

²H. H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (1942; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 8.

³*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴John McClure, "Changes in the Authority, Method, and Message of Presbyterian (UPCUSA) Preaching in the Twentieth Century," in *The Confessional Mosaic: Presbyterians and Twentieth-Century Theology*, ed. M. Coalter, J. Mulder, and L. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 93.

While academic homileticians are studying how language works, language is working overtime in the culture. Increasingly, “for better or worse, the authority of our age is the authority of experience.”⁵ Perhaps this has always been so, but the kinds of linguistic experiences shaping hearers today are vastly different than 30 years ago. Preachers can no longer count on familiarity with the stories of the Bible, much less with christology. Hearers shaped by *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, and *Third Rock from the Sun*, *ESPN* and *CNN Headline News*, expect sermons that are accessible and entertaining. If this trend continues, “good” communicators will be rewarded with larger “audiences” and “poor” communicators will serve smaller and smaller flocks. The temptation to please one’s hearers is neither subtle nor new. The tougher question is whether it will lead preaching away from the gospel of holy redeeming love.

II. RECOVERING OUR BEARINGS

What preachers need most is not a good five-cent cigar, an overhead projector, or the latest iteration of Powerpoint. Technicians are legion. What preachers need most is a convicting vision that inspires and instills a passion for souls and an unshakeable confidence in the purpose and power of preaching. Frankly, we need to know that preaching is not merely necessary, but crucially important; we need to know why it demands and deserves our highest priority and best effort week after week.

Preachers spend most of their energy on *what* to preach. However, prior to questions about content and form, exegesis and the poetic imagination, craft and performance, is a much more basic question: Why preach at all? What is going on theologically in preaching? The most important question is not, What makes for a good sermon or even good preaching? but rather, What makes for effective preaching? A “good” sermon can be described, designed, and delivered. We need more of them. The idea of *effective* preaching throws us into deeper water, into the province of word and Spirit. Before the preacher conceives of an idea that might give birth to a sermon, and especially when the preacher’s spiritual well is dry, the preacher needs an energizing, motivating passionate vision of effective preaching. Edward Farley calls this “a convictional vision.”⁶

With this important and fairly narrow focus in mind, we will examine H. H. Farmer’s dynamic evangelical understanding of preaching, which is no longer familiar to most seminarians or pastors.

A. *The Theological Underpinnings of Farmer’s Homiletic*

In 1964, Fortress Press launched “The Preacher’s Paperback Library” under the editorial leadership of Edmund Steimle. Steimle sought “to hold in balance” a scholarly commitment to the centrality of preaching and “the very practical con-

⁵Barbara Taylor, “Preaching the Body,” in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, ed. Gail O’Day and Tom Long (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 210.

⁶Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 7.

cerns of theological students and parish pastors who are engaged in the demanding task of preparing sermons of biblical and theological depth which also speak to the contemporary world.”⁷ I cannot improve upon Steimle’s mission statement, nor upon his opening gambit—a reprint of H. H. Farmer’s little gem, *The Servant of the Word*,⁸ which repays careful study.⁹

Farmer identified three strands of thought that augur for a dynamic evangelical understanding of the nature and purpose of preaching. First is the concept that the activity of preaching and the content of the message are integrally connected. “The means and the content, the preaching and the message are indissolubly one and cannot be separated from one another....Preaching and the message are one organic whole.”¹⁰ This insight was brilliantly developed a generation later in Henry Grady Davis’s *Design for Preaching*.¹¹

Farmer’s second insight concerns the historical nature of revelation itself. In Jesus Christ, God has done something decisive in history that cannot be proved or even grasped by reason or reflection. The essence of Christianity, for Farmer, is an event—the saving act of God in Christ—which cannot be known unless it is communicated and believed. God acts through the medium of human communication to spread the gospel. Without preaching, the saving knowledge of God’s redeeming love would simply die out. “Whoso said Christianity, said preaching.” Thus preaching is necessary to transmit the story of the gospel.¹²

The third tributary feeding Farmer’s project is a partially realized eschatology. The good news is not a finished work but a work in progress. God’s saving love, begun in Jesus Christ, is in the process of being realized every time the gospel is proclaimed and believed. The church itself is part of the divine saving activity in history: “The Event to which the Church bears witness is not receding farther and farther into the distant past, but is still going on, and *the Church itself is part of its ongoing*.”¹³ The first coming of Christ is the decisive beginning of the end of history which is yet to appear. “The kingdom is already in our midst, but it is not here in its fullness....[I]n the coming of Christ the lightning has flashed, but the thunder of God’s final victory is yet to sound; yet lightning and thunder are one event. Now into this stream...of God’s saving activity in history...the Church is taken up.”¹⁴

⁷Edmund Steimle in Farmer, *Servant of the Word*, v.

⁸The book is based on the Warrack lectures delivered by Professor Farmer in Scotland in 1940 and first published in the United States by Charles Scribner’s Sons in 1942.

⁹Herbert Henry Farmer (1892-1981) was a British Presbyterian. He served as pastor of two congregations in England, taught for four years at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, and was professor of systematic theology at Westminster College, University of Cambridge, from 1935 until his retirement in 1960. He wrote nine books and was the Warrack Lecturer in 1940, the Lyman Beecher Lecturer at Yale University in 1946, and the Gifford Lecturer at Glasgow University in 1950-1951.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958).

¹²Farmer, *Servant of the Word*, 8.

¹³*Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 10.

The organic connection between the activity and the content of preaching, the practical necessity of preaching to make the revelation and redeeming grace present, and the recognition that the church's proclamation is part of an unfolding eschatological drama infuse preaching with a dynamic evangelical purpose. Preachers are not making biblical book reports or merely reporting what happened 2,000 years ago. Nor are they merely applying or making relevant universal truths contained in scripture. When preachers faithfully preach the gospel, they are participating in the ongoing redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ. "Bearing witness to the unique, saving activity of God in Christ is now seen not as merely an adjunct, even an indispensable adjunct to, but as indispensably part of, the saving activity itself. It is carried by it, and itself carries it."¹⁵ A generation later, Fred Craddock said much the same thing:

Preaching not only has a theological context but is itself a theological act. Preaching both proclaims an event and participates in that event, both reports on revelation and participates in that revelation, bringing it home to the listeners not only in honest reporting but with the immediacy of a living voice addressed to these gathered here and now.¹⁶

So far we have a functional definition of preaching: Preaching is that distinctively Christian form of utterance which, when faithfully heard, makes present God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ. But Farmer was also interested in why God uses preachers and preaching to effect salvation. Presumably, God could have selected another more efficient method. The answer to this question holds important implications for preaching. If preaching is a means of grace, then the goal of preaching is salvation. Salvation entails and is initiated through a living, personal relationship between men and women and God through Jesus Christ. Faith comes through a divine encounter between persons—by hearing—and it is maintained through what Martin Buber called an I-thou relationship that is replicated in preaching. Craddock again:

The necessity of preaching resides in the fact that when God saves a [person] through Christ He insists on a living, personal encounter...here and now in the sphere of present personal relationships. 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, and has continued throughout the ages in the sphere of redeemed personal relationships (which is the true Church), now focussing on me, confronting me, as a person indissolubly bound up with other persons at this present time. This focussing on me is not apart from what has gone before, nor can it be, for it is part of the continuous purpose throughout the years which began in Christ; hence preaching is telling me something. But it is not merely telling me something. It is God actively probing me, challenging my will, calling on me for decision, offering me His succour,

¹⁵Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁶Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985) 47.

through the only medium which the nature of His purpose permits Him to use, the medium of a personal relationship.¹⁷

It will be helpful to unpack some of Farmer's theological presuppositions. Farmer believed on dogmatic rather than exegetical grounds that God always works in history through human agents to bring about a personal encounter that inaugurates and sustains personal relationships. This makes preaching necessary. Effective preaching occurs when the preacher carries the "solemn responsibility for creating that I-thou relationship with [the] hearers in which the divine Thou Himself approaches men and women."¹⁸ An I-thou relationship exists when two self-conscious, self-directing wills relate in a situation that both consider important and within which one will conditions the other non-coercively so that each remains free. The perfect medium for this encounter is speech, because in speech the speaker's will is immediately present to the hearer, shared meaning is created and operative, and both speaker and hearer are under a claim of truth which may be accepted or rejected. This bears directly upon Farmer's homiletic: "We may say that preaching is strong and effective precisely in the degree to which it combines these three things—will, claim, shared meaning—into maximal unity." Speech is "the vehicle of a direct I-thou relationship between you and those you address, and so, in and through that, between God and those you address."¹⁹

B. The Homiletical Dividends of Farmer's Insights

Having sketched the heart of Farmer's homiletic, we are now in a position to assess how his convictional vision can help contemporary preaching.

1. The Inspiration of a Convicting Vision

As a preacher and a sympathetic critic of preaching, I appreciate the need for a clear and convincing vision of preaching and the problems that arise when that vision is lost. After preaching seven or eight consecutive Sundays plus funerals and weddings, I cannot recall why God chose preaching or why I'm preaching, for that matter. My motive is survival, my objective is purely professional: getting up sermons so I won't discredit my office, humiliate myself, and embarrass my friends. Sometimes a preacher's vision of preaching goes out of focus because of crises, tragedy, or turmoil in the congregation. Sometimes the wheels of progress grind so slowly in the parish—or actually seem to be rolling in reverse—that preachers doubt the efficacy of preaching and their own effectiveness in particular.

Especially at such times I draw renewed confidence from a convicting vision that "preaching is sacramental, that God uses it as a means of His saving approach to the souls of men and women,"²⁰ that through my preaching the Lord who made heaven and earth "is actively probing me, challenging my will, calling on me for de-

¹⁷Ibid., 15.

¹⁸Ibid., 50.

¹⁹Ibid., 38.

²⁰Ibid., 17.

cision, offering me His succour”²¹ through the medium of the preached word. Farmer puts it so powerfully: the context of preaching “is always God’s saving activity through history in Christ,” and the focus of preaching “is the encounter of that saving activity with those who listen.”²² Preaching is more than relevant and important—it is salvific and holy.

When this vision is grasped, it impacts the preacher powerfully and creates in us and in our hearers an excitement and enthusiasm for what is about to happen. “Everything depends on carrying with you a sense of the living, saving, present activity of God in Christ.”²³ This vibrant vision of preaching gives me the courage to walk by faith and not by sight. It inspires me to strive above all else to make contact with God’s will throughout the process of conceiving, preparing, and delivering sermons. It also motivates me to devote my best efforts to preaching. If God uses the foolishness of preaching, “we are under obligation to see that it is not more foolish than it need be.”²⁴ To do anything less is simply to fulfill a professional task. Such perfunctory preaching is rarely effective in the sense of creating the I-thou relationship that lies at the heart of effective preaching. In short, Farmer’s compelling vision of preaching gives preachers confidence in our calling and reminds us that we are accountable to the One who has commissioned us to preach.

2. *The Guidance of Theological Criteria*

Several theological principles or criteria can be derived from Farmer’s understanding of preaching. Rather than state them dogmatically, they can be formulated as diagnostic questions.

Content and Focus: Is this sermon essentially an essay, a theological lecture, a discussion of current social, political, economic, or moral issues, or is it concerned primarily with God’s saving activity and present summons to the gathered faithful?

Does the subject matter of this sermon illumine or cloud the saving purpose of God and God’s desire for a personal encounter with those who will hear it?

Does the sermon announce good news, something that God has done for our salvation, and not something we need to earn or accomplish?

Does the sermon convey the truth in such a way that men and women are helped not just to feel or appreciate, but to *see* and respond to the truth?²⁵

What is the major thing God would have me say in this sermon?

Claim: Does this sermon bring the hearers directly and inescapably under the claim of truth? An effective sermon will be marked inevitably by a note of summons.²⁶ Farmer helpfully suggests that preachers should “have inscribed over our

²¹Ibid., 15.

²²Ibid., 17.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 18.

²⁵Ibid., 55-57.

²⁶Ibid., 45.

desks the master text of all sermons...‘Behold I stand at the door and *knock*.’”²⁷ Does this sermon knock? Does it expect anyone to answer and allow the King of Glory to enter?

Tone and Mood: Is my preaching marked by a humble authority that respects the hearers and is neither too dogmatic nor too timid? Does the sermon “keep the direct personal relationship dominant?”²⁸

Motivation: Am I working with that degree of concentrated effort produced by the knowledge that in my preaching God is seeking an encounter with men and women of an unspeakably critical kind, that in my preaching the whole historic saving purpose of God is seeking temporarily to focus itself?²⁹

These criteria, while not exhaustive, can help shape and guide preaching as an evangelical event commissioned, commanded, and indwelt by God.

3. Two Strategic Considerations

A number of practical considerations flow naturally from Farmer’s reflections on the nature and purpose of preaching. I will emphasize two: the importance of the pastoral relationship in preaching and the need for concreteness in preaching. Farmer’s best insight is that the primary medium for God’s revelation and redeeming love is not knowledge or sentiment, but personal relations. Thus, preaching is a pastoral activity that is part of a larger network of personal relationships. The preacher, the sermon, and the hearers, “are embedded in this larger system, and what the preaching effects largely depends upon it.”³⁰ This means, among other things, that the most effective preaching is done not by guest preachers but by faithful pastors who love and grow with their congregations year after year “in concrete personal situations wherein there is cost.”³¹ It also means that the preacher’s relationship with God and with others directly impacts the context and hence the message that is heard. Issues of personal integrity, the pastor’s prayer life, and the congruence or incongruence between our personal and professional lives matter greatly. We know this intuitively if not experientially, but Farmer reminds us why. It matters because God encounters men and women through the personal relationship that undergirds preaching. Finally, if the optimal medium of proclamation is a direct personal relationship, then whatever impedes this, such as reading a manuscript, offensive rhetoric, purple prose, insensitive illustrations, or lengthy quotations, is suspect.

Farmer’s understanding of preaching also has implications for the language of proclamation. Farmer believed the appropriate mode of discourse will approximate “the natural and spontaneous directness of serious private con-

²⁷Ibid., 44.

²⁸Ibid., 40.

²⁹Ibid., 19.

³⁰Ibid., 66.

³¹Ibid., 67.

versation.”³² Moreover, the preacher will at all times strive for “concreteness.” Farmer was a sworn enemy of abstractness, calling it the greatest curse of all our preaching.³³ Abstractness fails not only because it is difficult to understand and is boring, but more importantly because it screens people from an encounter with the living God, who “comes at people not through abstractions at all, but through persons and through the concrete situations of day to day personal life.”³⁴

If you write a sermon, for example, on the problem of suffering, I guarantee that the result will be very different if you write with your mind fixed on someone in a hospital bed rather than with your mind filled with what was said in a class-room theological lecture, though the essential truth of the latter may be what you really want to convey.³⁵

Farmer’s image of preaching as personal encounter and his call for particularity and disdain for abstraction were embraced and powerfully developed by H. Grady Davis. The key to Davis’s homiletic is for the preacher to get hold of a compelling idea under the guidance of scripture and then take every thought, paragraph, and illustration captive to it. His acknowledged debt to Farmer can be seen in his discussion of a “generative” idea.

A generative idea must meet certain tests, not the least of which is that it must grip the heart and fire the imagination of the preacher: “Only an idea that comes alive in the preacher has power to expand into a living sermon.”³⁶ Specifically, a generative idea should be focused and incisive, expansive, convincingly true, gripping, and evangelical, i.e., concerned with a facet of the gospel of Christ. I suspect that most sermons fail because they are not based on an idea that addresses the preacher’s deepest concern. They are safe and therefore irrelevant, the result of a trip to what Davis called the homiletical beauty shop rather than to Mt. Sinai.

When we are at our best, preaching the word of God is, in James Earl Massey’s apt phrase, a burdensome joy. When we forget why God uses preaching, or what preaching is supposed to do, we lose our theological bearings and become professional sermonizers instead of servants of the word. What preachers need most, I believe, is a convictional vision of preaching that quickens our “sense of the living, saving, present activity of God in Christ”³⁷ which is H. H. Farmer’s continuing contribution to the homiletical conversation. ⊕

³²Those interested in exploring preaching as conversation should consult Lucy Rose’s *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), which presents an entire homiletic around the image of conversational preaching—gathering “the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the church are refocused and fostered” (5).

³³Farmer, *Servant of the Word*, 71.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 82.

³⁶Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 82.

³⁷Ibid., 17.