



Recent Books On Preaching

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Preaching is the church's oldest profession and its most important activity. Homiletics is critical reflection on that activity. Once away from seminary preachers rarely have the opportunity for professional supervision and evaluation—in short, for a continuing course in homiletics. What critical help they receive comes from articles, sermons, tapes, and books on preaching. These have been so plentiful in the last decade that the working pastor may not know where to begin reading. Since preaching integrates so many theological and practical tasks, it is the ideal locus around which the pastor may organize his or her continuing education. The preaching task is in reality a variety of tasks ranging from exegesis and hermeneutics to rhetoric and pastoral care. The best way to enter the extensive literature in homiletics and to shape one's own program of enrichment is to identify the area of greatest need or interest and to begin there.

I. THEOLOGY

Most of the books I shall discuss approach preaching by way of one of its components or tasks. An author's point of departure will determine his or her definition of the finished product. If one begins with the concerns of the hearer, as with Harry Emerson Fosdick, it may be that preaching will be conceived as an answer to life's fundamental problems. If the author is first concerned with the personality of the preacher, as in Phillips Brooks, the sermon's chief content may be the piety projected by and through the speaker. If one understands the Word of God as the all-determining impulse of preaching, as in the case of Karl Barth, the Bible will be central, but design and audience will receive little attention.

It is my conviction that the health and vitality of preaching depend on a right understanding of the gospel; hence the subtitle of my book, *A Theology of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) is *The Dynamics of the Gospel*. The good

news of God is the orientation of the Scriptures and all Christian theology. All theology and preaching turn on that axis. It is the basic message which preachers and homileticians too often take for granted in order to move on to other fads and methods by which they hope to revitalize preaching. Yet it is my experience that the deepest trouble preaching faces is theological. God's Word has been identified with cultural wisdom or political posturing. The glorious freedom of the children of God has been reduced to harmless moralisms. Listeners are admonished to be good, kind, open, and just, but are not offered the resources in God for becoming such people. At that point the sermon cannot be saved or revitalized, but only be born again by the power of the Spirit. As I understand the gospel, it is the dynamic and living power of God that not only

dictates the content of the message about Jesus, but also gives a particular linguistic form to the message, imparts urgency and passion to its delivery, and transforms the life of those who preach and hear it. If there is any one term that encompasses this multiform activity called preaching, it is *gospel*.

A Theology of Preaching is only one of several contemporary theological studies of preaching. *Liberation Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980) by Justo and Catherine Gonzalez provides an effective introduction to liberation theology from the perspective of preaching. Especially enlightening are the Gonzalez' remarks on the social location of the biblical interpreter in their section, "The End of the Lone-Ranger Bible Study." A recent Roman Catholic theology of preaching, *To Stand and Speak for Christ* (New York: Alba House, 1981) by Joseph Fichtner, explores not only the biblical grounds for proclamation, but also summarizes post-Vatican II developments. Fichtner's work builds upon the most systematic theology of preaching in the Roman Catholic tradition, *Proclaiming God's Message* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University, 1965) by Domenico Grasso. From the Reformed perspective Dietrich Ritschl's older *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond: John Knox, 1960) systematizes Barth's three forms of the Word of God and draws Barthian implications for the practice of preaching. Indeed, all contemporary Protestant theologies of preaching are heavily dependent on the Reformation tradition of Luther, Calvin, Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, especially Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1, *The Word of God*, and Bonhoeffer's *Worldly Preaching* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1975).

Supplementing these theological studies is my text, *Theories of Preaching* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1986). It is a primary source book in the homiletical tradition and consists of 50 selections, with introductions, on preaching by key figures such as Chrysostom, Augustine, Luther, Spenser, Wesley, Edwards, Brooks, Finney, and Barth, as well as contemporary thinkers like Amos Wilder, Helmut Thielicke, Paul Ricoeur, Fred Craddock, Juan Luis Segundo, and Phyllis Trible. This book organizes the tradition under such rubrics as The Preacher, The Event, Hermeneutic, Rhetoric, and The Holy Spirit, thus providing a systematic framework for investigating the church's reflection and wisdom on preaching.

II. GENERAL INTRODUCTIONS AND SURVEYS

Students and teachers of homiletics have long sought the one book on preaching between whose covers all practical and theological wisdom on preaching is to be

found. No such comprehensive book exists in English. The closest thing we have to a systematic and practical treatise on preaching is Rudolf Bohren's *Predigtlehre* (rev. ed.; Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1980), which systematically addresses all topics related to preaching, including theories of communication. Fundamental to Bohren's theological approach is the location of preaching within the doctrine of the Holy Spirit rather than Christology, the Word, or the Church, as is the theological custom. Bohren's book has dominated European homiletics but, unfortunately, still awaits translation into English. American homileticians have produced comprehensive textbooks on preaching, but none so deeply grounded in theological convictions as Bohren's. Clyde Fant's *Preaching for Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) has found wide use among students and pastors who have appreciated Fant's practical approach and his

readable style. Like most surveys, this book sketches the theology and history of preaching, taking special care to debunk the myth of the 19th century as a Golden Age of Preaching. The most valuable parts of the book, however, deal with communication, especially the chapter entitled “Impact, Communion, and Shock.” Fant’s is one of the few texts that provides a realistic and practical guide to the step-by-step production of a sermon. His section on “The Oral Manuscript” is indispensable for those looking for an alternative to manuscript preaching, for in it Fant offers an oral method of preparation that enables the preacher to internalize the message from its inception.

John Stott’s *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982) is the much-heralded comprehensive statement on preaching from one of England’s best known evangelicals. Stott most emphatically does *not* debunk the myth of 19th-century greatness. His book breathes the spirit of Spurgeon, B. W. Dale, and their latter day representatives, G. Campbell Morgan, W. E. Sangster, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Though evangelical in tone, the book presents a curiously non-theological preunderstanding of human nature. Stott prefaces his theology of preaching with an analysis of the listener in terms drawn from cybernetics and communications. To that analysis he proceeds to add five “convictions” about God, Scripture, and the church that form the basis of his theology of preaching. The most valuable chapter of the book is “Preaching as Bridge-building,” in which he describes the “cultural gulf” between the two worlds of the Bible and our own day and outlines his approach to preaching on modern ethical and social problems. The book’s strength lies in its crisp packaging of traditional assertions about preaching. Its weakness is its failure to provide a practical and critically-informed method of preparing sermons that reflects modern hermeneutical and biblical studies.

Fred B. Craddock’s new book, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), *assumes* a vast background in hermeneutical theory and theology but, unlike Stott’s introduction, does not demonstrate its research with extensive quotations and footnotes. The result is a book that is disarming in its simplicity and style but more comprehensive and profound than most available textbooks. The eleven chapters include important comments on the preacher’s life of study and on biblical interpretation, but its greatest contribution lies in Part III: “Shaping the Message into a Sermon.” Here Craddock deals with the intimate relationship between form and content. He reminds us of the many available forms in

the New Testament and their role in shaping sermons. He warns the reader against the arbitrary adoption of one of the many conventional sermonic forms without first testing the adequacy of the familiar pattern against the formal structure of the biblical text. In this respect, Craddock supersedes many traditional homiletical texts which were implicitly based on the rules of classical rhetoric. Those who are looking for rules for sermon preparation and extended examples of sermon development may be disappointed by the spaciousness of Craddock’s book, for in place of the rules of “selecting a form” he offers the freedom of “creating a form” that is suggested, though not dictated, by the text itself.

III. DESIGN

It is impossible to speak further of form or design of sermons without mentioning H. Grady Davis’ *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958). The book is in its

eleventh printing and continues to be a useful instructor on the formation of sermons. Much of what is today heralded as a new approach to sermon design can be found in clearer and more concise terms in Davis. His two chapters on functional forms delineate preaching as proclamation, teaching, and “therapy,” by which he means speeches for improvement. His suggested organic forms of sermon development may appear to be obsolete in light of Craddock and others, but among them is an excellent discussion of “A Story Told.” Before narrative became a fashionable word in homiletics, Davis understood the sermon as a “movement in time” and taught his students to design sermons accordingly. His book, though weak in the area of exegesis and hermeneutics, remains the most complete rhetoric of preaching available.

Fred Craddock’s earlier book, *As One Without Authority* (Enid, Okla.: Phillips University, 1971; 3rd ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), devotes itself to what Davis would call one of the continuities of the sermon, namely, the inductive continuity. It was this book which effectively called into question the deductive sermon with points and subheads, introduction, and formal conclusion. Craddock argues for the use of an inductive method in preaching, by which the particulars of Scripture and experience are narrated in such away that the form of the sermon becomes invisible. Form is in complete service to the destination the preacher wishes to achieve. Craddock’s work is sensitive to the way people learn and grow; they do so not by authoritarian fiat but through a participatory process. The trick, then, is to shape sermons not according to artificial structures, which the mind, says Craddock, tends to resist, but to create organic structures which follow the contours of human experience and communication.

One of the enduring strengths of Davis’ *Design for Preaching* is its reliance upon *many* rhetorical tools in service of the gospel without limiting the preacher’s resources to one form or element. Craddock’s book on inductive preaching is open to the criticism that, as attractive and refreshing as his method is, it is not the only way to develop a sermon. The mind is also capable of abstraction, synthesis, and rearrangement. Far from resisting the artificiality of an obviously structured sermon, the hearer may welcome it. Many a preacher has announced a series of points only as a convenience to the hearer. The announced structure has been so filled with biblical imagery, story, witness,

drama, and appeal that the number of points, indeed, the structure itself, has been unimportant to the impact of the sermon.

Such a criticism might be leveled at another recent book on form, *Preaching Biblically* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), edited by Don M. Wardlaw. The subtitle of this book is *Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture*, and it defends the questionable thesis that the sermon’s form should duplicate the form of the text. *Preaching Biblically* is a series of essays on sermon design. Each essay is followed by exegetical observations and a sermon. Contributors include pastors and homileticians. The most compelling of the essays is “Shaping Sermons by Plotting the Text’s Claim Upon Us” by Thomas Long. He too stresses the inadequacy of elaborate sermon structures, preferring instead a “movement” of elements which make up a sermon plot. These may be arranged in as simple a scheme as Element #1 → Element #2 → Element #3 → denouement. Long’s approach borrows some insights from literary criticism and serves to remind the preacher that the sermon is an unfolding in time toward a climax and denouement. Yet reliance on the form of texts cannot be pressed. It is not difficult to adduce an

example or two of texts whose form appears to necessitate an identical sermonic form. But outside these few training examples, most texts do *not* dictate sermon structures. Certainly the form says something of the purpose of the writer, though even here form can be misleading, and it says something of the kind of experience the writer wishes the reader to have. But beyond that, little more. Some of the sermons seem so self-preoccupied that the call of God does not always get through the richness of imagery, figures, and poetic allusions.

IV. BIBLICAL PREACHING

Despite the awakening of homiletics to biblical studies, and despite the partnerships that frequently occur in seminaries between biblical scholars and homileticians, there are few truly illuminating books in the area of Bible *and* preaching. One such book is *The Bible in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978) by Leander Keck. Keck's thesis is that the renewal of Christianity will occur only as it has in the past, through the rediscovery of the Bible. In pursuit of the elusive biblical preaching, Keck jettisons fundamentalist and expository approaches to Scripture that collapse the distance and the difference between the biblical world and our own. He advocates "priestly listening" as a style of exegesis that does justice to the authority of the text and to the office of the public proclaimer of the Word. Priestly listening does not plunder the text for ideas or subjects that will "preach," but reflects upon the issues and questions posed by the text itself. Once the minister hears the text, he or she is now in a position to become a priestly witness to what has been heard. In his chapter "When Preaching Becomes Biblical," Keck first dispatches the nemesis of most preaching, moralism, and then establishes his own criteria for biblical proclamation: the Bible governs the content of the sermon, and the function of the sermon is analogous to that of the text. Indispensable to this task is historical criticism, for only criticism can reveal how the text stood within the circle of its original readers, so that the contemporary preacher (and sermon) may adopt an analogous stance within the church today. Throughout the book, Keck il-

lustrates his thesis with numerous allusions and examples from the New Testament. A final chapter includes three sermons. *The Bible in the Pulpit* is not a text-to-sermon guide. Most such helps are just that—help—where deeper knowledge is necessary. The value of Keck's book is the deeper (re)orientation it offers the preacher in the ways of genuine biblical preaching. With a good compass, other helps will not be necessary.

Toward the end of his book Keck comments on the parables and their proclamation. In light of the burgeoning interest in the parables of Jesus, as evidenced by the work of biblical scholars like Amos Wilder, John Dominic Crossan, Dan Via, and Robert Funk, it may be appropriate to seek a bridge from parable research to preaching. Very little scholarship has focused on the *preaching* of the parables, so little, in fact, that our best recourse is to turn to the German master, Helmut Thielicke, for an example of sound proclamation of the parables. His book, *The Waiting Father* (New York: Harper, 1959), went out of print but is now available again from Baker Book House. I consider Thielicke a model preacher because he integrates the component duties of preaching so unaffectedly. He combines storytelling, theology, and biblical exegesis with sensitivity to human experience and power of rhetorical expression. He never simply retells the story but dialogues with it as though speaking *for* his silent hearers. He does

not invade the private space of the listener with contemporary allusions and near-photographic imagery, but by using the story as a heuristic probe of motivation, experience, and action, he leaves just enough distance to include most hearers. Thielicke also manages to combine storytelling and its own required integrity, with the direct address implied by the kerygma.

V. WORSHIP

Classical rhetoric knew that the context of any speech is of enormous significance to the message and its reception. Under the influence of Protestant theologies that stressed the autonomy and sufficiency of the Word, homiletics turned an indifferent eye to the proclaimed Word's environment in worship. Although Protestantism has joined the liturgical renewal sparked by Vatican II, preaching has not caught up. Nothing major has been done on the relationship of preaching to the liturgy, sacraments, and church year. While we await that work, we may draw some benefit from William Skudlarek's *The Word in Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), which delineated some aspects of the relationship. With clarity and concision, Skudlarek presents chapters on the church year, the lectionary, preaching and sacrament, preaching at the Eucharist, and preaching at baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Skudlarek's competence and confidence in his material is such that, although a Roman Catholic monk, his chapters speak to Protestants as well as Catholics. He has been careful to draw upon Protestant sources, and in an appendix he supplies a convenient guide to lectionary helps and subscription services.

VI. THE PREACHER

Baker Book House has done us a good turn by reissuing some of the standards in the field. One of these is Phillips Brooks' classic *Lectures on Preaching* (New York:

E. P. Dutton, 1877; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), a book whose influence continues to register on homiletical thinkers. Although the lectures treat a variety of subjects, including "The Idea of the Sermon," and "The Making of the Sermon," Brooks is best remembered for his integration of theological truth and the personality of the preacher. His definition of preaching as "the bringing of truth through personality" was derived in greater measure from the liberal assumptions of his age than from an explicit doctrine of the Incarnation. Yet his fascination with the character of the preacher has not met its equal in our own day. Indeed, in a time of growing interest in spirituality, almost nothing has been written about the personal holiness or character of the one who preaches God's Word. The modern reader (male or female) will find Brooks' preoccupation with "manliness" oppressive, but Brooks had a keen eye for the many ways ministers indulge their moods, inflate their egos, and cushion themselves from the realities others must face daily. With great perception he writes, "The people who gather closest around a minister's life, believing his beliefs, and accepting his standards, make a sort of cushion between him and the unbelief and wickedness which smite other men in the face and wound them mercilessly at every turn" (67). His enumeration of the desired traits in the preacher remains a part of the liberal project, for traits such as gravity, courage, honor, and the like, though laudable, are never explicitly grounded in the preacher's relationship with God in Christ. That is to say, the qualities are extrinsic and imitative rather than real and organically derived from the preacher's

personal and sacramental adherence to Christ.

The book on the preacher's holiness—aside from a chapter or two in P. T. Forsyth's *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind* (New York: G. H. Doran, 1907)—has not been written. The recent rediscovery of “my story” as a major element in what is sometimes called autobiographical preaching is no substitute for Christian character, without which the sermon is only words.

A welcome addition to the literature on the person of the preacher is Hans van der Geest's *Presence in the Pulpit: The Impact of Personality in Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981). The German title, *Du hast mich angesprochen* (You have spoken to me), better indicates this book's concern for interpersonal communication. The wealth of theological and practical reflection in this book emerges from an empirical base of more than 200 analyses of worship services and sermons, most of which took place within the framework of the Center for Clinical Pastoral Education in Zollikerberg, Switzerland, where Dr. van der Geest is Supervisor. Other books have attempted to bring empirical data to bear on the study of preaching, but this is the only book I know that brings to the data the principles of rhetoric and communication as well as clear and incisive theological construction. For all the density of its data, the book is laid out with simplicity and clarity. An early chapter outlines the author's clinical method. On the basis of his research, he isolates three overarching dimensions of effective preaching. The first is security, by which he means the formation of trust between preacher and listener. Van der Geest writes, “The preacher's entire education should take into consideration that the contentual element, valued so highly, only has meaning if the preacher's personality is capable of communication within the realm of Christian faith” (64). While exegesis, doctrine, and

theological content are important, the wholeness of the preacher is necessary in order for the Word to arrive at its deepest possible destination. The second dimension is deliverance, by which van der Geest means the sermon's power to make some new reality or possibility present to those in need. Incidentally, there is in this section one of the finest analyses of law and gospel in the homiletical literature, especially in its reference to the actual responses of listeners. The third dimension is understanding, by which the author means the preacher's ability to nurture and lead the congregation to greater awareness of its calling in the world. In this section, van der Geest analyzes narrative, image, and conceptual speech, and reports that the personal “I-story,” with its narration of incidents from the preacher's life, often obscures the truly personal and fails to speak to the depths of the audience's experience. The fascinating quality of this study, again, is its graphic honesty with regard to the lay estimate of preaching. A final chapter deals with the personality of the preacher and its effect on the listener. The entirety of this book deals with the sermon's (and preacher's) *effect* on the audience and, as such, is the only book available that is so rigorously restricted to the perspective of the listener.

A more tangential value of *Presence in the Pulpit* lies in its references to German homiletical literature. In addition to Rudolf Bohren, whom we mentioned earlier, this book provides bibliographical materials on leading German homileticians such as Otto Haendler, who has done a study of preaching and depth psychology, Manfred Josuttis, Manfred Mezger, Ernst Lerle, Gert Otto, Ernst Lange and many others. The notes indicate that the traditional German interest in theology is being supplemented by psychology, communications theory, and rhetoric.

VII. PASTORAL CARE

Hans van der Geest's work was carried out in the context of Clinical Pastoral Supervision and, therefore, has rich implications for pastoral care. This is another area in which relatively little has been written. Donald Capps' book, *Pastoral Counseling and Preaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), is less illuminating than van der Geest's but, nevertheless, provides a competent survey of several models of the relationship of counseling and preaching. Most interesting is his summary of approaches in the first chapter. They include Fosdick's identification of preaching and counseling, Thomas Oden's delineation of a common kerygmatic base for counseling and preaching, and Edgar Jackson's use of group dynamics theory to evaluate a congregation's response to various types of preaching. (This latter approach is modified and used by van der Geest.) Capps wants to transfer the categories of diagnosis from pastoral counseling to proclamation. To this, end he develops his own paradigm of diagnosis which he applies to several sermons, including Schleiermacher's touching funeral sermon for his son Nathanael. The format of interspersing sections of sermons with commentary on the various elements of the diagnostic paradigm may interrupt the reader's experience of the sermon. Yet it is useful to have the tasks compared for those whose ministry entails both the preaching of the gospel and the pastoral cure of souls.