



Ethics in the Pulpit*

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In some Protestant churches there is the “children’s sermon.” the pastor invites all youngsters to the chancel for conversation. One Sunday the preacher began the children’s sermon asking, “What has four legs and a bushy tail and runs up and down trees and gathers acorns?” No answer. Again, “What has four legs and a bushy tail and runs up and down trees and gathers acorns?” Still no answer. A third time, “What has four legs and a bushy tail and runs up and down trees and gathers acorns?” At last one tot volunteered, “Sounds to me like a squirrel but I’m sure the answer must be Jesus.”

Hearing unpredictable answers from precocious tykes is one reason grownups enjoy the children’s sermon. As a practitioner, I was delighted with these surprises. I found it easy to “milk” the darlings for laughs and gratify my desire to be an entertaining performer in the chancel. I could *use* the children—a question of ethics.

I. THE APPEAL TO SELF-INTEREST

Kenneth Burke, who has done an encyclopedic study of geniuses in the history of speechmaking, discovered that their common secret was in *identification*, which he explained like this: “It is so clearly a matter of rhetoric to persuade a man by identifying your cause with his interests.”¹ Some preachers in the electronic church are aware of this, making capital out of claiming the more we give them, the more we’ll prosper.

Karl Barth warns against making preaching “a service performed for clients.”² Grady Davis in his widely-used homiletics textbook cautions:

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¹Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives* (Cleveland: World, 1962) 579.

²Karl Barth, *The Preaching of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 136.

Any successful appeal to selfish motives, however “religious” the form it takes, leads my victim away from the lordship of Christ.³

With my Lutheran spectacles I have looked at Kenneth Burke’s prescription to identify with one’s hearer’s interests in terms of a “theology of glory” versus a “theology of the cross.” It was out of self-interest that James and John asked for the two most prominent positions in Jesus’ cabinet in the coming kingdom. It was not in Peter’s self-interest that the Messiah should be crucified. A “theology of the cross” does not seem to be congruent with a theology of self-interest.

As a parish pastor, I found myself exegeting texts on *agape*, selflessness, all the while I was learning about the attention-holding power of *identification*, self-interest. One week I encountered Matthew's conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount about the wise person who built his house upon a rock, enabling his structure to withstand all manner of calamity. It came to me: Jesus was appealing to my self-interest. If I hear his words and do them, I'll be prudent and survive. And what are these words? They are about *agape*: turning the other cheek, going the second mile, and loving my enemies. Was Matthew portraying Jesus as appealing to my self-interest in order to move me to be selfless?

Then it struck me that the Beatitudes promise that if I'm poor in spirit, or mourn, or am meek, or hunger and thirst for righteousness, or show mercy, or am pure in heart, or make peace, or am persecuted, I'll be happy. In time I began to see the appeal to self-interest in other accounts of Jesus' teaching: that the truth sets us free (John 8:32-35), that he came to give us the abundant life (John 10:10), and that he wants our joy to be full (John 15:11). Certainly the promise of eternal life identifies with my self-interest.

Although skeptics scorn such motivations as "pie-in-the-sky," the devout take them seriously. I saw that, from time to time, I had already been identifying with my people's self-interest, although not consciously. I asked, "Why not do it on purpose?"

Then I had this text from Luke 14 about my ego. Jesus says that when I'm invited to a marriage feast, it is in my self-interest not to elbow my way to the best place at the table because someone is bound to come along who outranks me, and then with shame I shall have to move down. Rather I should start at the lowest place, and then the host is bound to come and say, "Friend, go up higher." At that point I'll gain approving looks from everyone present. But then comes the punchline (which I see as nothing else than legitimate self-interest): "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (14:11).

Motivating people by showing what's in it for them—it's risky. Yet in my view it's all over the Bible, in Deuteronomy, in the Psalms, in Jesus, and in Paul. If it's scriptural but risky, how do we know when we're using it ethically? So far I haven't been able to develop any formula—just guidelines, testing my appeals by the Golden Rule, the "theology of the cross," and asking, "Am I being as wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove?"

³H. Grady Davis, *Design For Preaching* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958) 136.

Although the risk of abuse is always there, I wonder if we aren't sometimes at fault in the other direction. If we expect people to "listen up" just because we stand in the pulpit, giving them no reasons for believing and obeying, aren't we treating them as objects? We give all credit to Karl Barth for rescuing a large segment of the church from nineteenth century rationalism by insisting that, "since God wills to utter his own truth, his Word, the preacher must not adulterate that truth by adding his own knowledge or art."⁴ But in his zeal to protect the Word from human artifice, Barth may have overstepped on the side of disregarding the personhood of those before him. F. L. Herzog has observed:

It is well known that according to Barth, revelation creates its own point of contact. An understandable objection to this view asks whether this does not mean to throw the Biblical message at man like a stone.⁵

To assume that everyone wants to grow in spirituality, to love the neighbor, or to support social justice is not realistic. To ignore mind, will, and emotions without showing the advantages of believing and obeying in the midst of our miseries—that may not be ethical either. It's risky to appeal to self-interest; it's risky not to do so.

II. THE ETHICS OF THE PREACHER'S ATTITUDE

A certain pastor boasts of graduating from college with a double major *magna cum laude*. Another who has been to the Holy Land doesn't let the people forget it. Still another who knows some important people just happens to find ways to drop a big name now and then.

A superiority complex does not improve communication. One theorist defines persuasion as the art of reducing the distance between Sender and Receiver. Arrogance hardly supports that strategy. Exalting ourselves while proclaiming him “who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped”—this has moral implications.

One would think that we heralds of *agape*—of all people—would be protected from a lack of humility. But there are some things built into our vocation—good things—that create the temptation, and those good things are that we are called to be prophets, evangelists, and priests.

1. *Our Attitude as Prophets*. Responsibility weighs heavily on those who stand watch on the walls of Zion. But therein lies the snare—to assume that we are beyond contradiction. And so it has been said concerning the preacher's message:

The truth or virtue of it we are to accept without proof...The choice for the addressee boils down to whether he will say “amen” or throw bricks.⁶

This comes from a rhetorician who seems to have chosen to throw bricks. Perhaps one might react to him as I first did when I said, “This man is anti-

⁴K. Barth, *The Preaching of the Gospel*, 13.

⁵Frederick L. Herzog, “Theologian of the Word of God,” *Theology Today* 13 (1956) 326.

⁶Huntington Brown, *Prose Styles: Five Primary Types* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1966) 71.

clerical. After all, we can't help we're called to proclaim, “Thus says the Lord.”” As I've wrestled with this, however, I have come to see that it's my attitude that's the issue. If I'm “dumping” on the people, then the verdict of this rhetorician is just. But if I recognize that “Thus says the Lord” applies also to me, that gives it another tone.

After all, not all the gifts belong to us. The Holy Spirit “apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor 12:11). It has been said that in matters of justice, the Bible gives us clear directives on the *what*; but since we're now living in a different culture, it can not define the *how*. In the age of Deuteronomy it worked well to leave the corners of the field unreaped for the benefit of the poor, but that system can not apply in our economy. So we preachers need the insights of other members of the body of Christ on the *how*. Herbert Farmer allows the preacher to speak with authority but also observes: “*Deus cognitus, deus nullus*. A theology that knows every mortal thing is a sham.”⁷

2. *Our Attitude as Evangelists*. During the 1960s I became acquainted with some writings of Harry Golden. In one of his pieces he wrote:

I consider Billy Graham a great Christian and an eminent gentleman. He is an evangelical minister of the Gospel who never tries to evangelize me.⁸

Before commenting on that, let me bring in something else. Some rhetoricians claim that monologue is unethical, since the monologist—speaking from the top downward as the dispenser of truth—apparently assumes that he or she is superior to the listener. Rather, the speaker should be in dialogue, communing with the souls of the audience, aware of their self-interest. One rhetorician writes:

Although the speaker in dialogue may offer advice or express disagreement, he does not aim to psychologically coerce an audience into accepting his view. The speaker's aim is one of assisting the audience in making independent, self-determined decisions.⁹

The word that leaps out is *coerce*. The man has a point; the ethical speaker respects the personhood of the listeners. That brings to mind the picture drawn in Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." Even the omnipotent Lord won't force his way into any heart.

Now I go back again to Harry Golden's remark about Billy Graham who "never tries to evangelize me." At first that would seem hard to believe. Yet, since Billy Graham understands *agape*, it isn't hard at all. We know about the salesperson who is friendly because he or she has a house to unload. We recognize that in our zeal to share the gospel we shall not negate the gospel. Billy Graham, even while yearning for the conversion of a person like Harry Golden, can still love that person without making conversion a condition of that love.

Gabriel Marcel describes our dilemma this way:

⁷Herbert Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 63.

⁸Harry Golden, *You're Entitled* (New York: Fawcett, 1963) 125.

⁹Richard L. Johannesen, "Attitude of Speaker toward Audience: A Significant Concept for Contemporary Rhetorical Theory and Criticism," *Central States Speech Journal* 25/2 (Summer 1974) 96.

The Christian in fact cannot in any way think of himself as possessing either a power or even an advantage which has been denied to the unbeliever. There we have one of the most paradoxical aspects of his situation, for in another sense, he is obliged to recognise that grace has been bestowed upon him. This, however, only remains true on condition that the grace should inhabit him, not only as a radiance, but as humility. From the moment that he begins to be proud of it as a possession it changes its nature, and I should be tempted to say it becomes a malediction.¹⁰

Evangelism in the pulpit? Of course. One of the New Testament words for preaching is *euangelizo*. That is not a matter of trying to coerce people with glittering generalities, but making the Good News accessible to them, showing how it fits their need and brings them the blessings they want, "assisting the audience in making independent, self-determined decisions." Or in the imagery of Revelation 3:20, it is letting them open the door from the inside.

3. *Our Attitude as Priests.* There is a tale about a colonial Puritan preacher who was against a certain women's hair style known as the "Top Knot." He preached on the text, "Top Knot, Go Down." Challenged to produce chapter and verse, he pointed to Mark 13:15: "Let him who is on the housetop not go down."

Is this a parable of the temptation that comes to us as priests? Is the cause so noble that anything goes, since we know what's best for our people?

What happens sometimes? Social issues might raise the emotions and beguile us into using loaded words and making sweeping judgments about welfare cheaters or Bible-thumping rednecks. Or there could be appeals to prejudice or unsupported assertions. In one denomination where there is a dispute about historical criticism, a befuddled lay person was heard to exclaim, "I don't understand what it's all about; all I know is, I love the Word of God," suggesting that this person has heard speakers oversimplifying the issue. I have been on both sides of this question. I can testify from my own experience that love for the Word of God is common ground between the opponents.

No matter how noble our aim, the use of loaded language, the making of sweeping assertions, and appealing to prejudices are forms of lying.

III. WHAT ABOUT PLAGIARISM IN THE PULPIT?

I can not pretend that I have questions about plagiarism because I have such a noble character. It is rather by providential accident. About the time that I was first reading C. S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, there came into our congregation a young Ph.D. in mathematics who was also reading them. Before long he offered to teach a high school class, and—wouldn't you know it?—it turned out to be a course on C. S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It would have been folly for me to have taken from these writers and not to have acknowledged them. So I quoted them directly, usually taking their books into the pulpit. I had the sensation that it gave more credibility to my own material when I freely admitted that lines were from someone else. I had the same experience when I paraphrased someone's idea and gave him or her the credit.

¹⁰Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1951) 159.

Should we acknowledge our sources? I think so. But this can be carried to a fault. There may be preachers who read a lot and cite every author, so that their messages are one quotation after another. I like their honesty, but I'd rather not preach that way. And which sources should we mention? Do we give an oral bibliography, including Nestle's Greek text? There is a stylistic problem of clutter. Common good sense will tell us when we should cite our sources and when it would be pointless.

What about borrowing from others when we're out of time? Preaching from Sunday to Sunday is hard enough, but then there's Christmas and Easter, Advent and Lent. I marvel at the incredible schedule of preaching that Roman Catholic priests have with their daily masses. The people in the pews probably have small appreciation of the effort required. Doesn't the exigency excuse us from the ordinary rules of honesty as we serve the Lord so diligently?

When we are caught like this, and the only way out is to use someone else's homily, why not just take the book into the pulpit, acknowledge whose work it is, and read it? I have done

that. On each occasion a good number of people gave me positive feedback. Not that it didn't take time; I rehearsed the reading out loud several times.

IV. USING OTHER PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES WITHOUT PERMISSION?

"Let me tell you about a person who came to see me in my office last week...." The preacher senses a rising tide of attention and the coughing subsides.

But let's put ourselves into the skins of the people. Some are hurting. We say, "Well, they should come and see us." They're saying, "Yes, and then become the subject matter of another juicy sermon illustration?"

We could counter, "Of course I never reveal anything that goes on in my present parish." Or, "You must understand that I'm serving an area where no one knows anyone." The people are still objecting, "Whether now or twenty years from now, whether people know me or not, I still don't want my secret life blabbed about in public. So I don't trust you as a pastor."

Some Protestant preachers mine a lode of illustrations from their family life. People are usually delighted to hear of the antics of the baby and the toddler. I find no fault with that. But the toddler soon becomes acquainted with the language and aware of the self. What then? We might explain, "Well, I only report the good things my child does." But don't "preacher's kids" have enough to contend with already? Why embarrass them?

What to do? The gospel shall be proclaimed. We have evidence of its life-changing power from personal observation. And we're denied this resource? Not altogether. When the good Lord has brought solace, reconciliation, or freedom, the person, couple, or family may be willing to celebrate that victory in the communion of saints. Why not ask permission to share it? If given, we protect ourselves by explaining that we relate this incident only with consent.

The legitimate appeal to self-interest, the preacher's attitude toward the people in light of the calling as prophet, priest, and evangelist, the heavy schedule that tempts one to borrow without attribution, the desire to enliven the sermon by using others' stories without permission—I haven't found much in the homiletical literature on these matters, but I believe they deserve attention.