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# Preaching autobiography: connecting the world of the preacher and the world of the text

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## **Preaching Autobiography: Connecting the World of the Preacher and the World of the Text**

David Fleer and Dave Bland, Editors

Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2001

260 pages, \$25.00 Softcover

“To tell, or not to tell: that is the question.” When, if ever, should preachers tell a first-person story in the sermon? For those wrestling with this question, *Preaching Autobiography* provides good insight. In Part One, five preachers/professors discuss sermonic autobiography theoretically. In Part Two, two preachers exemplify the method via twelve of their actual sermons. The Foreword identifies the main issue driving this book:

Personal references from the pulpit, the preacher’s exposure of the self, and narration of autobiography are, by my reckoning, some of the most dangerous, theologically questionable of homiletical practices — and among the most essential... I am tempted to advise, “Never, under any circumstances, tell anything about yourself... in a sermon!” Yet, we must. (10, 13).

Chapters 1-5 explain why sermonic autobiography is both dangerous and essential. The danger lies in making the human preacher the focus of faith, thus detracting from Christ. Certain New Testament passages seem to oppose sermonic autobiography; notably, Paul’s statement, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified... so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:2, 5). Further, in this culture of rampant subjectivity, preachers ought not foster this world’s infatuation with celebrities. Personality cults can develop when the preacher’s life is thrust under the spotlight. Finally, some preachers do it badly, using the pulpit as a confessional to reveal more of themselves than people want to or need to hear.

While the authors identify such perils, they clearly favour sermonic autobiography. First, they show where Paul did refer to his own life: “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). The argument goes, “If Paul did it, so can we.” Second, the authors emphasize that rhetorically, “it works.” First-person references do foster listener attention, identification, and hopefully, life change. Third, preacher and listener bond in the act of self-revelation. The theory is that self-revelation

begets self-revelation, which produces a closer relationship among preacher, hearer, and God. Finally, since the Gospel is ultimately incarnational, sermonic autobiography has theological basis. As witnesses to the Gospel our lives need to show forth the change that Christ has made in us. How preachers live then, becomes part of the sermon.

To avoid the perils and realize the potential of sermonic autobiography the authors offer advice. First, make sure your story is shaped by Scripture and tied clearly to the biblical text you are preaching. It must make the understanding and application of the biblical passage more clear. Second, make sure your story is shaped by and joined to the larger faith community's story. Self-revelation is for their benefit, not yours. Third, use personal revelation to witness to Christ. It is the Gospel that determines why and how we self-disclose as a means of preaching Christ.

A small gem surfaces in chapter 5, "Love Embodied: Reading 1 Corinthians 13 Autobiographically." This new insight claims that Paul self-discloses when he says, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love..." (13:1). Paul tells his own story, pointing to himself as an example of how to be more loving. Such an interpretation may legitimize our own sermonic autobiography.

In terms of weaknesses, while they quote regularly from works in homiletics and theology, the authors show no familiarity with the notable references on autobiography from the fields of English literature or counseling. More self-critique or suspicion would balance this book (e.g., a chapter opposing sermonic autobiography). Perils are named, but not tackled sufficiently. Though it is good to combine theory and practice in a book, 110 pages of sermons (42% of the book) seems excessive. Surely, 4-5 sermons would offer sufficient example. This reader desires more theoretical depth and less sermonic breadth.

Seminary trains preachers to exegete the biblical text, but not necessarily to exegete their lives. This book sharpens our awareness of how the biblical text intersects with our daily experience, both negatively and positively, and pushes us to preach that experience. It advocates that since God speaks to us through Scripture and experience, we need to also incorporate the latter. Written by preachers for preachers, *Preaching Autobiography* says, do tell!

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