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THEOLOGY NEWS & NOTES



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The State of Preaching

THIS ISSUE of *Theology, News & Notes* attempts to make an assessment of a critical, but mercurial issue. What is the state of preaching in the church? It is critical because most of us believe that the church can only be as strong as its proclamation of the Word of God. It is hard to pin down, however, because most of us are familiar only with a thin slice of the Church's proclamation. We typically hear one sermon per week and usually from the same preacher. How can we assess the overall state of preaching in the nation, or in the world?

Those of us who teach preaching in seminaries hear far more sermons than the average believer in our work teaching students the craft and art of preaching. Yet, students' beginning sermons are not a measure of the sermons they are hearing in the church, nor even of the sermons they will deliver when they gain experience. It seems that the best measure, short of a Barna poll about preaching in North America, will be anecdotal. We hear people speaking about great preachers in some places. We hear others bemoan the crisis in preaching in others. Scientific polling on the question is a good idea, but for another medium. Our hope here is simply to listen to the reports about preaching that can be gathered in a slim resource such as this and trust that the voices give some glimpse of how things are with the Word, or how things could be if we learned from wise masters.

The material in this issue, though thoughtful and born of much study, is not intended to be academic. There is, however, one technical term that crops up here and there. The word is *homiletics*. It means, as all seminary graduates know, the study of preaching: its theology, art, and craft. In an issue on the state of preaching, this term is hard to avoid.

Another thing that is hard to avoid is the understanding that preaching can mean many things and not all of us have the same expectations of how the pulpit is to be used. But most preachers and teachers of preaching hold to a central conviction that preaching is a human attempt to bring a word from the Lord. It is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and by grace through the Holy Spirit, it comes alive in the pulpit as the Word of God. In other words, we are speaking of biblical preaching. There are other kinds—and they may have their place—but this is our principal focus here.

Several of the articles in this issue of *Theology, News & Notes* are written in hopes of influencing the state of preaching. We begin with a word from one of America's master pulpiteers, Lloyd John Ogilvie, known for a career of faithful and impassioned biblical preaching. Fuller Seminary has established an Institute of Preaching in his name, the purpose of which is to continue his legacy of passionate preaching and to host conferences which will allow preachers to be mentored by Dr. Ogilvie as they learn to bring their preaching to new levels. Dr. Ogilvie's remarks here are culled from his address at the institute's inaugural event on October 5, 2006. While it is impossible for the written version to capture the familiar resonant baritone with which he spoke, his zeal still springs forth from the printed word as he speaks of the power that comes from sermons embodying the passionate love of Christ for the world.

Three other masterful teachers have provided helpful guidance for shaping effective sermons. Marianne Meye Thompson, professor of New Testament at Fuller, has been considering for a long time the nature of the gospel message. In her article she helps preachers to know what it means to preach the gospel. In "Seeing Jesus: Preaching as an Incarnational Act," Jana Childers, academic dean and professor of preaching at San Francisco Theological Seminary, provides an answer to the critical question, what is good preaching? As a means of assisting all pastors to become better preachers, the School of Theology's communications teacher, Doug Nason, has provided an up-to-date bibliography which points us in the direction of print resources to refresh our skills.

Other voices in this issue attempt to speak to the state of preaching in the Church. From Fuller's School of Psychology comes a thoughtful and helpful discussion on the personality of the preacher. Richard Gorsuch helps pastors to understand the psychological issues involved in achieving faithful, humble proclamation. William Pannell, senior professor and former holder of Fuller's DeKruyter chair in preaching, provides a critical, yet positive review of the state of preaching in the African American church. My own contribution to this volume considers issues relating to what some are calling a crisis in preaching in the North American church. Based on

my discussions with lay folk, preachers, and fellow homiletics, I attempt to describe some of the causes of preaching that seems to miss the mark, and to suggest ideas that may sharpen preachers' focus.

As integrator of this issue, I am especially grateful for the eager participation of a slate of international teachers of preaching that I have come to know over the years. They have contributed brief snapshots of the state of preaching in their cultures and geographic locations around the globe. Some are reports; others take the form of an interview in which I ask their views. Their participation here indicates their understanding that preaching is critical and central to the growth of the Church around the globe, and their commitment to strengthen biblical preaching in the Church worldwide.

This issue on preaching concludes with a look to the future. Edmund Gibbs, senior professor and former Donald A. McGavran Professor of Church Growth in Fuller's School of Intercultural Studies, has become a leading expert on the emerging church and the future of the Church's mission. He now works closely with the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts as director of the Institute for the Emerging Church. In an interview with Fuller PhD candidate in preaching Lisa Lamb, Eddie points preachers toward the

future of the Church and gives suggestions as to how proclamation can provide stability and leadership in an age where ecclesial foundations are quaking.

Each voice in this issue is speaking from a limited perspective. None of us is able to monitor the state of preaching beyond what we gather each time we hear a given sermon. But the voices have been carefully selected to provide a reasoned, experienced assessment of what is, and of what is needed.

The state of preaching is a critical issue to the Church. It always has been. Paul captured the urgency in Romans: "How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach to them?" (Romans 10:14).

We pray that this modest attempt at taking the Church's homiletical pulse may help preachers understand the urgent nature of their work and provide encouragement for a renewal of commitment to their calling to make clear, strong, truthful proclamation of the Word. Paul concludes his comments on preaching by paraphrasing a line from Isaiah. May his words be a blessing for those who accept the call to proclaim God's love in the world: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" ■

THEOLOGY NEWS & NOTES

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THE MINISTRY OF FULLER

Fuller Theological Seminary, embracing the Schools of Theology, Psychology, and Intercultural Studies, is an evangelical, multid denominational, international, and multiethnic community dedicated to the preparation of men and women for the manifold ministries of Christ and his Church. Under the authority of Scripture it seeks to fulfill its commitment to ministry through graduate education, professional development, and spiritual formation. In all of its activities, including instruction, nurture, worship, service, research, and publication, Fuller Theological Seminary strives for excellence in the service of Jesus Christ, under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of the Father.



Preaching with Passion

IT WAS CHRISTMAS Eve. Construction of the sanctuary of the fledgling Winnetka Presbyterian Church was complete and its congregation ready for the first worship service. The building committee had a mysterious request that I not see the new pulpit in the chancel until just before I preached the first sermon that evening. Still, as I followed the choir down the center aisle during the hymn of adoration, I was astonished to see the pulpit covered by a large tarpaulin.

The tarpaulin remained through the adoration, confession, supplication, and intercession portions of the worship. When it was time to read the Scripture and preach, my heart thumped as a magnificently carved pulpit, with a large lectern at the center, was revealed. My excitement grew as I got closer, and a chill went up my spine as I looked down.

Carved into the lectern, just below where the Bible rested, were the words spoken to Phillip by the Greeks when they wanted an audience with Jesus: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

I was so moved by this reminder by my people of the deepest longing of their hearts and the most urgent quest of their minds, that I stood silent for what must have seemed like an eternity. A lump formed in

my throat and tears streamed down my face. In that divinely inspired moment, I recalled my college freshman experience—longing to know Christ more intimately, the call to preach Christ, my commitment to lifelong study and preparation to communicate abundant life in Christ, and a conviction that Christ could change the lives of people. In the echo chamber of my mind reverberated two quotations I had memorized so long ago. One was by Zinzendorf: “I have one passion only: It is he! It is he!” The other, from Spurgeon: “We have a great need for Christ and a great Christ for our needs!”

Forty-six years after that memorable Christmas Eve, I seldom enter a pulpit to preach without remembering the clarion call of those words, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus!”

The Purpose of Preaching

The primary purpose of preaching is to proclaim the adventure of knowing Christ. It is to communicate the astounding good news of his desire to have us know him, his persistent search for us, his profound love for us, his propitious forgiveness offered to us, his power to transform our lives, his presence with us to give us strength and courage, his plan for us to live abundantly a life that difficulties cannot diminish or death destroy, and his provision for us to live forever in heaven with him.

“Is there any word from the Lord?” The answer to that biblical question is yes! “I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘know the Lord,’ for they shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 31:33–34).

The purpose of an institute of preaching, as part of the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts at Fuller, is to cultivate a new breed of passionate preachers. The great need is for preachers who really *know* Christ, are able to introduce people to him, and can help them grow in their knowledge of him. These will sound the clarion call for the ministry of the laity, and write the 29th chapter of Acts—a new chapter to be written in our time.

There is a fundamental lack of passionate preaching in a majority of the pulpits across our land. Preaching has been devalued among the multiplicity of pastoral responsibilities and congregations have become accustomed to preaching that is neither inspiring nor impelling. Expository preaching of the Bible often is replaced by topical oratory that is little more than anecdotes threaded together on a thin popular theme to entertain and assure popularity.

The great need is for scholar preachers who are steeped in the Scriptures, committed to expository preaching, sustained by bold biblical convictions, strengthened by personal growth in prayer, and sharpened by intellectually stimulating, spiritually compelling, and emotionally moving communication. Dwight L. Moody was right: “The best way to revive a church is to build a fire in the pulpit.” I say that fire must begin in the heart of the one who stands in that pulpit.

The Meaning of Passion

To equip passionate preachers, we need to be clear what we mean by *passion*—a word misused in our day. We reject the contemporary definition of passion that is limited to sex. Fortunately, an English translation broadens the scope of the word to “strong feelings of love, anger or desire,” but this is still the surface. We must press deeper to discover the meaning of passion in the Greek New Testament. *Paschō* is directly related to Christ’s suffering on the cross. Acts 1:3 is a fulcrum text: “He [Christ] presented himself alive after his suffering by many infallible proofs.” Here *pathein* is the second aorist active of *paschō*. *Pathein* is also used in Acts 17:3 and 26:23 for Christ’s suffering, his substitutionary vicarious sacrifice for the sins of the world.

But press on! The word *passion* in the Greek New Testament is used for the suffering of the first century followers of Christ. Paul uses a compound word, *sunpaschōmen*, “to suffer with Christ.” In Romans 8:17 suffering with Christ is the secret of being glorified with him (*sundoxasthōmen*). “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God and if children then heirs—heirs of God—joint heirs with Christ—if indeed we suffer with him that we may also be glorified together.” The “if” could be translated “since.” There is nothing conditional about suffering with Christ or being glorified with him when we do.

Here is an authentic definition of *passion*: profound love produced by Christ’s own Spirit, inspiring a fresh experience of his grace, accepting his suffering for us, and producing in-depth empathy for the suffering of others. Three realities are inseparable in authentic passion: *Ta pathē tou Christu*, Christ’s suffering; *ta pathē ma*, my suffering; *ta pathē matatous*, their suffering. Passion is reaching out with one hand for the nail-pierced hand of Christ, receiving his healing love for our deepest hurts and hopes, and then reaching out to the people around us. It is allowing our minds and hearts to be crucibles for our own experience of Christ’s unqualified, unmerited, unfettered love compounded by our identification and involvement in the often hidden suffering of others.

Don’t miss the astounding promise that when we suffer with Christ we’ll also be glorified with him. As we share in

Christ’s passionate love for people who desperately need him, we will be glorified with him. Glorification is much more than being complimented or extolled. The glory of the Lord is the revelation and manifestation of what he is and all that he is ready to provide. To be glorified with Christ is to be drawn into the glory circle of the Trinity and receive the Father’s approbation of grace and the Spirit’s appropriation of power to maximize human talent and training with the magnitude of supernatural gifts. There is a *chrism* (anointing), that results in authentic *charisma* (grace giftedness).

Passionate Preaching

What does it mean to preach with this passion? Christ himself is the focus, and the gospel is the source of the stirring convictions that stimulate true passion. We must be centered on the *kerygma* and the *didache*—the proclamation and the teaching—of the New Testament. We must live in the ethos of the first-century church and its essential message focused on the preexistent Christ, the divine Word of God, the incarnate Son, the suffering, crucified Savior, the risen Victor over Satan and death, the triumphant reigning Lord, and the baptizer with the Holy Spirit. Oscar Cullman said, “It is the present Lordship of Christ, inaugurated by his resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God, that is the center of the faith of primitive Christianity.”

It is also the center of a passionate preacher’s study. We come from our time of study and prayer with the conviction that what happened to the followers of Jesus and the early Christians mysteriously—but undeniably—can happen in the lives of people today. We preach with passion when we have listened to people’s deepest needs and most urgent questions, when we enter into their agonies and ecstasies, and when we realize that without Christ they are lost now and for eternity.

There is, however, something more at the source of preaching with passion. The conviction that fires our preaching is that when we come to be in Christ, the old passes away and the new comes. People can be changed! *Metanoia* and *metamorphoō* are inseparably related. Repentance, to change our minds from self-reliance and self-justification, makes possible a transformation of a person’s character, personality, values, goals, and objectives. An old self in bondage to pride, self-centeredness, and fear can be transformed!

The faces of people who have been changed by Christ over fifty years of my preaching experience stream before my mind’s eye: young and old, rich and poor, successful and struggling—all needed to be transformed by Christ, and through the miracle of preaching, were able to confess their need, receive the gift of faith, commit their lives to Christ, be filled with his Spirit, and begin the adventure of discipleship.

SYNOPSIS

Ogilvie, on the inaugural event of the Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching at Fuller, speaks of the power that comes from sermons that embody the love of Christ, and what is required of today’s ministers to preach with passion.

Lloyd John Ogilvie is president of Leadership Unlimited and founder of the Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching at Fuller. He served as chaplain of the U.S. Senate from 1995–2003, has authored 52 books, and was the general editor of the 33 volume *Communicators Commentary of the Bible*. He was educated at Lake Forest College, Garrett Theological Seminary (Northwestern University), and New College, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, and has received 16 honorary doctorates. He was recognized in 1996 by Baylor University as one of the 12 most effective preachers in the English-speaking world—a list that includes Billy Graham and John Stott.

James Stewart, my professor of New Testament Theology at New College, University of Edinburgh, gave me a mandate for the ministry of preaching. He said the preacher of the gospel is essentially a herald of the most magnificent and moving tidings that ever broke upon the world, the mighty acts of God in and through his Word, the Mediator. What was the essence of the proclamation of the original heralds of the faith? They proclaimed that prophecy was fulfilled, that in Jesus of Nazareth, in his words and deeds, his life and resurrection, the kingdom of God had arrived, that God had exalted him, that he would come again as Judge and that now was the day of salvation.

“Never forget,” Stewart reminded me, “you are working for a verdict. You are hoping and praying to leave your people face to face with God in Christ.” That goal must never be preempted. Preaching is not the propagation of gentle views, but the proclamation of good news. The purpose of our scholarship is not the gathering of esoteric ideas to be discussed with erudite language, but the preparing of a sermon as a divinely intended encounter where women and men become acutely aware of the Lord’s presence, and where a worshipping congregation will forget about the preacher and be confronted and comforted by the living Christ.

People will be able to say of the passionate preacher:

’Twas not just the words you spoke
To you so clear, to me so dim,
But ’twas that when you preached
You brought a sense of him.
In your eyes he beckoned me
And in your smile his love was spread
Until I lost sight of you
And saw the Lord instead!¹

Our calling is Paul’s admonition to Timothy, “Preach the Word!” (2 Timothy 4:2). He not only was called to preach, but to preach the Word. The Latin phrase is our motto, *Predicatio verbi divini est verbum divinum*—“The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God!”

Our need is to confirm John Calvin’s conviction: “The Word goeth out of the mouth of God in such a manner that it likewise goeth out of the mouth of men; for God does not speak openly from heaven but employs men as his instruments. . . . It is a singular privilege that he designs to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men [and I would add, women] in order that his voice may resound in them.”

The realization that an exposition of a verse or portion of the Bible, empowered by the Holy Spirit, will be the Word of God to the congregation energizes preachers. It relieves them

with full confidence.

Q: *What is the level of theological and biblical training among the clergy and among lay preachers in the Malaysian church?*

TT: Most of the clergy in Malaysia have gone through seminary training programs earning typical theological degrees. As for lay preachers, the situation varies. Some receive a little training in their churches; others attend seminary classes as part-time students. In recent decades, seminaries in West and East Malaysia have been organizing lay-training programs or lay schools of theology. Their purposes are to train and equip lay leaders to be ready to serve alongside the clergy in various ministries, including preaching.

Q: *In your experience, how strong is the proclamation of God’s Word in Malaysian churches?*

TT: In general, churches in Malaysia have a very strong emphasis on biblical teaching and an evangelical approach to the proclamation of God’s Word. In most cases, preaching is offered as spiritual empowerment for Christians in their daily lives. As the church grows rapidly in Malaysia, there are enormous numbers of Christians that come as new believers. (The Christian population in Malaysia has grown from 4% in the 1960s to

of the dreadful assumption that they are dependent on human resources to cajole and convince reluctant listeners. We must never lose our wonder over this mystery and our awe that the Word of God will be spoken through us. This will fire the passion so urgently needed in our preaching.

The Passionate Preacher

Preachers have been called to an adventure where we experience what we exposit: Nothing can happen *through* us that has not happened *to* us. We can reproduce in others only what we have rediscovered in our own experience.

I agree with 19th-century American Methodist Bishop William A. Quayle, “Preaching is the outpouring of the soul in speech. Therefore, the elemental business in preaching is not with preaching but with the preacher. It is no trouble to preach, but a vast trouble to construct a preacher.”

Our calling is to equip and enable preachers who will allow the biblical text or passage to have its full impact on them. They must live in the passage and let it speak to them before they speak it to the congregation. The truth is undeniable: we can lead others only so far as we have gone ourselves; we cannot give away what we don’t have. Truth and reality, faith and experience, discovery and application, never should be separated.

about 8% of the total population today.) In light of this, preachers need to preach the basic biblical texts strongly, and teach with biblical detail and clarity. In this way, these new believers can be nurtured and equipped for their faith journey in Christ.

Q: *Are there particular theological issues for preachers to keep in mind as they preach among the cultures of Malaysia?*

TT: First, an incarnational approach is always a theological issue for carrying the message of the gospel of Christ. Thus, as preachers deliver the message of the gospel to people of all cultures in Malaysia, we need to remember to deliver a “down to earth” (to put it in Luther’s terms) message, so that the gospel message is made relevant to the people. To achieve this, preachers need to go into the midst of the peoples in their various cultures and circumstances, in order to understand them.

Second, reconciliation is a contextual theological issue that preachers need to deal with. The people we serve in the Malaysian church are coming from numerous cultural backgrounds. They speak many languages and have diverse values. Each culture also has its own set of practices. Because preachers are doing ministry amidst these differences, it is always important for us to speak a message of the gospel’s reconciliation. Preachers are the bridge-builders and peace-makers who

Four cardinal convictions of the gospel—unconditional grace through the cross, union with Christ, the character transplant that occurs when a person becomes his postresurrection home, and the call to be his disciple are the drumbeats of great preaching and the sources of true passion.

The unqualified, unfettered, unlimited love of God in Christ must thunder forth with the passion of one who knows the reality of being preventively loved and forgiven. Rembrandt painted his own face in the crowd at the foot of the cross in his painting of the Crucifixion. We must write and then preach the reality of the cosmic atonement of Calvary as men and women saved by grace alone.

Our calling is to make the vital reality of forgiveness plain and clear. What God in Christ did at the cross was not only to motivate people’s repentance, lift up their hearts, rekindle and remake their wills: It was to redeem the whole fallen creation. It was to introduce into the tragic syndrome of pride and petulance and resultant alienation and loneliness, that leads on to further anxiety and deeper fear, a force capable of shattering for the first time that vicious circle in which humankind was bound and helpless. The cross is the divine strategy. The method of this strategy is forgiveness.

Preachers must be gripped by this message, allowing it to become one of the driving motivations of their preaching.

seek to create a harmonious multicultural community within the church.

Third, proclaiming a theology of hope is a key theological issue that I would like to mention here. By preaching incarnationally and proclaiming reconciliation, Malaysian preachers are able to bring hope to a people so greatly divided by language, values, practices, and influenced by non-Christian religions.

Q: *What would you like our readers to know about the state of preaching in Malaysia? Are there things we might keep in prayer as the Word is proclaimed in these areas?*

TT: I would like people to know that it is always a celebrative and joyful moment for the preachers in Malaysia to be able to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. We consider it a precious privilege for Christians, as the minority community in Malaysia, to be able to practice our faith. As preachers continue to proclaim the gospel faithfully, we give witness to how the Spirit is at work in people’s hearts, bringing them to faith in Christ.

Finally, as preachers and Christians in Malaysia, we can use the prayer support of your readers as we press on with our proclamation of God’s Word and our faith journeys. We are strengthened knowing that the global Christian community is in solidarity with us through prayer.



THE STATE OF PREACHING IN . . . Malaysia

Clay Schmit talks with Thomas Tsen, professor of practical theology and preaching, Sabah Theological Seminary, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia

Q: *Professor Tsen, the church is growing in Malaysia, in spite of the fact that it is a predominantly Muslim country. Are there special challenges for preachers proclaiming the gospel in the cities and countryside of Malaysia?*

TT: In these regions of the world, most of the churches are confronting a culturally and religiously diverse situation. Malaysia is one of the world’s most diverse countries. Preachers in these contexts are being challenged to seek multiple approaches in delivering the gospel message to the people. Preachers also need to respect other faiths and cultural values while they hold to biblical preaching and remain faithful to the scriptural texts. In a multifaith country where Islam is the majority religion, preachers seek to emphasize faithfulness in daily living, so that Christians can live out their faith

Our method should be to use all means to help men and women to understand forgiveness.

There is great power in our proclamation of prevenient grace. People will hear not just our voices, but the whisper of the Spirit in their souls, reminding them that God's grace is always beforehand with them, love that is given before it is either deserved or even asked for.

When I arrived at New College, even though I had been a Christian for several years, I lacked spiritual power. I accepted that Christ had died for my sins and that through the power of the resurrection I would live forever. My concern was how to live the abundant life Christ promised. Inside, I was much the same powerless person I had been when I became a Christian: insecure, anxious, and uncertain. My theoretical orthodoxy had pinned me to the mat of self-generated piety. I was hammer-locked by the idea that my status with God was dependent on my performance. I had the words without the music; I was occupied with my studies about Christ, but had no personal relationship with him.

Several deep conversations with Professor Stewart exposed my restless, self-justifying efforts to be good enough or work hard enough to earn God's love. One day he looked me in the eye, grasped my coat lapels, and concluded his explanation of grace with four liberating words, "You are loved *now!*"

This personal encounter prepared me for a moving experience a few days later in Stewart's class. His lecture was on John, chapter 14. He spoke about the present, indwelling power of Christ as our living contemporary. Our lives, he said forcefully, were to be Christ's postresurrection home. With a fine blend of exegesis, exposition, scholarship, and classical and contemporary illustrations of people who had experienced the power of the indwelling Christ, Stewart vividly described what it meant to abide in Christ and for Christ to abide in us. The truth struck fire in my mind.

Then, before Stewart ended his lecture, he paused, whipped off his glasses and stood looking out the window as if transfigured by a vision of Christ. In the crisp, staccato words so characteristic of his preaching and teaching, he said, "If we could but show the world that being committed to Christ is no tame, humdrum, sheltered monotony—but the most exciting adventure the human spirit can know—those who have been standing outside the church and looking askance at Christ will come crowding in to receive his grace, experience forgiveness, become new creatures and be filled with his indwelling Spirit. And we may well expect the greatest revival since Pentecost," Stewart concluded with his firm conviction of Christ's transforming power. He asked a question, "And why not?" And then, looking each of us in

the eye, he pressed for a verdict, "Why not you?" The question throbbed in my heart. I was stirred profoundly. I decided then and there that I wanted to be part of that revival.

Preparing the Sermon

Another vital factor of preaching with passion is to be thorough in preparation. Our *pathein* should be focused by *spoudē*, diligence, earnestness, and intentionality. Great preaching is the result of one hour in preparation for each minute in the pulpit! John Henry Jowett said, "Preaching that costs nothing accomplishes nothing. If the study is a lounge, the pulpit will be an impertinence."

For me, a most valuable lesson about preparation I have learned is the importance of listening to people in profound caring relationships. The preacher's listening moves back and forth between God and the people. When we listen attentively to our people, we discover their hurts and hopes, their deepest questions and most urgent needs. There is nothing so foolish as the answer to an unasked question. The problem with many preachers is that they insist on answering theoretical questions which may not have occurred to their people. Conversely, there is nothing so powerful as a biblical exposition that is Christ-centered, Holy Spirit-empowered, personal, empathetic, and illustrated from real life today.³

With preparation completed, I am ready to write the sermon. I'm convinced that writing out sermons is an absolutely necessary discipline to definitively clarify my thoughts, avoid muddled thinking, pet phrases, and clichés while safeguarding against shallowness, simplicity, and sloppiness. Also, it defends our listeners from extemporaneous wanderings.

There's a wonderful story of Martin Luther testing the Spirit's power by approaching the pulpit extemporaneously, without study of his text. "What did the Spirit say?" his friend Melancthon later asked. Luther replied, "He said, 'Martin, you are not prepared!'"

The sermon deserves, Stewart taught me the value of sheer hard work, sweat of brain, and discipline of soul. There is no shortcut to escape the burden and the toil. Any evasion of the cost will inevitably rob a person's ministry of power. "Any refusal to accept the relentless, implacable discipline will result in diminished spiritual influence," he insisted. "Put into your sermons your unstinting best."

While writing our sermons demands rigorous hard work, we will find that these hours often are times when we feel the palpable power of the Spirit give wings to our writing. When our preparation time is completed, the sermon should be in us, like a banked furnace waiting to break forth with flame and heat under the bellows of the Holy Spirit. We will be saved from one preacher's plight:

His sermon had the usual heads
And subdivisions fine;
The language was delicate
And graceful as a vine.
It had its proper opening
'Twas polished as a whole
It had but one supreme defect—
It failed to reach the soul.³

The Power of Prayer in Preaching

The next aspect of preaching with passion is the power of prayer that produces the depth of insight and vision in our preaching. We preach what has become real to us in our own prayers. Through prayer, Christ infuses all the faculties of our cerebral cortex; his Spirit flows through our limbic systems; his power engenders energy through our sympathetic adaptation systems. For us, Christianity is life as Christ lived it, life as we live it in Christ, and life as Christ lives it in us. Intimacy with Christ is inseparable from integrity of character. And prayer is the source of it all.

Intercessory prayer for the people to whom we preach forges a bond of love between us and them. John Henry Jowett was on target: "We must bleed to bless." That quality of intercessory prayer takes time and energy. To plead before God for our listeners transforms our ministry to them.

There can be no other adequate explanation of preaching with passion than that Christ takes possession of us in prayer and preaches through us in the pulpit. Christ must have control of all of us that there is!

Bringing the Message to Life

Our search for the factors that contribute to preaching with passion brings us to the presentation of the sermons we labor so diligently to write, pray over, and review repeatedly until they are nearly memorized. Preaching is getting the message as a living reality into other minds. Our written manuscript should be so much a part of us that we can go into the pulpit with a single page of notes, or none at all. If we write a sermon which stands out clearly in all its parts before our own mind, the tyranny of the manuscript is broken. This freedom gives preaching a dialogical dynamic. People will feel they are in a personal conversation with us. There will be directness, urgency, and reality that will produce a living encounter of mind with mind, heart with heart.

The secret is to worship *with* the congregation. The grace of humility is given only as the preacher expresses praise, truly confesses, accepts absolution, surrenders burdens, receives hope, and experiences a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit. After that the sermon is ready to be offered as an act

of worship. Our words will come forth throbbing with a fervor and reality totally unlike an overly dramatic, pretentious, and self-conscious delivery. We do not have to impress others with our grasp of the truth or our commitment to the social gospel; we don't change people by our oratory alone or heal sick souls with our nifty nostrums. Christ is the only one who can do that! James Denney said, "No man can give at once the impression that he himself is clever and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save." I really believe that.

Conclusion

Great things can happen when we pull out the stops. We are challenged to consecrate to God all we have and are—scholarship, craftsmanship, technique, toil, and sweat of brain and heart—and then stand back and watch him work.

Can Christ use men and women today to preach with passion? If we give priority to preparation and prayer, if we really believe that the Word of God preached by the power of the Holy Spirit is indeed the Word of God, if we have no other purpose than to bring men and women into a vital encounter with the living Christ, if we throw caution to the wind and preach each sermon as if never to preach again, and if we leave all the results up to the Lord—we can preach with power and see lives changed, the church renewed, and society impacted by the ministry of a transformed, Christ-empowered laity. But not without a renewed commitment to preaching as the pastor's highest calling. P. T. Forsyth was right: "With preaching Christianity stands or falls."

Preaching must become the focus of theological education of parish pastors. The study of original biblical language, intellectually sound theological training, liberating psychological insight and counseling skills, leadership and administration techniques, sociology and ethics, spiritual formation, discovery of the power of prayer and igniting and fueling of the fires of consecrated, resurrection-inspired, Pentecost-infused passion—these must contribute to the preparation of the preacher to preach so that people can know Christ. Nothing is more important!

John Wesley said, "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God and such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of God on earth." My prayer is, "Give us passionate preachers and the commitment to train them so the church may not just survive, but thrive!" ■

ENDNOTES

1. Anonymous poem
2. For the full text, see www.fuller.edu/news/pubs/tmn/2007_Winter/
3. Albert M. Wells, Jr., ed. *Inspiring Quotations: Contemporary and Classic* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 163.



Just Preach the Gospel

A NUMBER OF years ago I was talking with a pastor who described the challenge of preaching to his large and diverse congregation, ranging from retired pastors to unchurched professionals. “It’s not easy to preach to those who have been preaching all their lives,” he said, “and, at the same time, to preach to those who don’t even know the names of the books of the Bible.”

“Matt,” I told him, “just preach the gospel.”

That answer raises some all-important questions: what is the gospel? and what would it mean to preach the gospel? Suppose, for example, that the pastor elected to preach through the book of Judges. One story after another tells of murder, warfare, destruction, personal calamities—and all without reference to the elements of what we traditionally

call the gospel story. How does one preach the gospel here?

Where is the gospel in Leviticus, with its lengthy instructions about purity, sacrifice, and the priesthood? In what way does Proverbs manifest the gospel?

Even passages in the New Testament challenge the preacher who wants to be faithful to the gospel. We are accustomed to the gospel as we find it in John 3:16 or Romans 10:9–10—but how do we

preach the gospel in the book of Revelation, with its recurring visions of judgment and destruction? As is well known, Martin Luther judged the book of James to be an “epistle of straw” with “nothing of the gospel about it.” How does one preach the gospel from a book that mentions neither the cross nor the Holy Spirit?

Of course, it is easy to tell others what to preach if you occupy the pew more often than the pulpit. To advise someone to “just preach the gospel” Sunday after Sunday sounds

like advice to repeat the same thing over and over, to gloss over the distinctives of different texts, and to generally offer a limited diet to one’s congregation. Perhaps what I should have said to Matt was, “let the gospel be your guide.”

What would it mean to let the gospel be your guide in preaching? In order to reflect on that counsel, we must come back to the question, what is the gospel? First and foremost, the gospel is God’s action, God’s story, God’s saving initiative toward the world which he has created. It bears repeating: *the gospel is God’s story. To preach the gospel, then, means sentences in which God is the subject of active verbs.* Beginning with accounts in Genesis and moving through the book of Revelation, it’s easy to make quite a list of all that God does: God speaks, creates, judges, calls, sends, saves, delivers, feeds, clothes, promises, loves, shows mercy and kindness, does justice, and so on. To preach the gospel is to proclaim the accounts of the Scriptures in light of the fact that their central character is God, and that the gospel is *from* God and *about* the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit.

I am reminded of a sermon I heard on John 11, the raising of Lazarus. The story is the climactic “sign” in the Gospel of John testifying to Jesus’ identity as the resurrection and the life. Jesus’ sign of raising the dead bears witness to the glory of God, that is, to the power of God to give life to the dead through Jesus. The fledgling preacher told the story, leading up to the dramatic moment when Jesus calls out, “Lazarus, come forth!” This story is one that embodies the gospel in all its simplicity—the power of Jesus, the one sent by God, and his word to give life. But, apparently feeling it inadequate, the preacher added, “And now Lazarus had to make a decision.” It is, of course, a ludicrous picture: a dead man deciding whether or not to obey the word of Jesus! But the turn of this sermon illustrates something pernicious in much modern preaching: it is so easy to make the most powerful of Gospel stories center on human action and not on God, to think that somehow *our* actions, *our* decisions, are

the heart and center of the gospel story. To make that move is to sell out the gospel.

Take a second example. I once did a survey of sermons on John 13. Virtually every sermon I found on the text—the story of Jesus’ washing his disciples’ feet—went straight for the “new command” that Jesus gives his disciples: Love one another, as I have loved you. These sermons showed both a quick move toward moral exhortation, something that human beings are to do, and an unmitigated optimism about human willingness and ability to “love one another as I have loved you.” That fact that Jesus embodies this sort of love through his self-giving death doesn’t seem to have held the attention of many interpreters very long.

To be fair, John’s text does have a command for the disciples. But there is another side to the foot washing that has to do with Jesus’ actions as he interprets them to Peter who resists Jesus’ attempts to wash his feet: “Unless I wash you,” Jesus tells Peter, “you have no part in me.” In other words, Jesus must cleanse Peter. This is not first a command for Peter to do something; it is first a story about what Jesus will do for him. Indeed, the gospel in this story is the gospel of God’s Word become flesh, and poured out in death for the salvation of humankind. It is the story one finds time and again in Scripture—God’s constant faithfulness to his resistant people: even as Israel resists God’s grace, so here Peter does too. In this context we recognize who we are, see our failures, and acknowledge our need for someone to “wash” us—and so receive the power and perspective to carry out the weighty command that Jesus gave his disciples. But put the cart before the horse, put human action in the center of the circle and move God to the periphery, and the gospel is no longer being preached. So to be guided by the gospel is to remember that the gospel is first and foremost about what God does, and not about what we do.

A second equally problematic move in preaching is to go for “general principles” or “timeless truths” that essentially rob the narratives of Scripture, and the gospel itself, of all their particularity. Scripture is not a compilation of eternal truths or spiritual principles; if it were, it would have quite a different shape than it does. Nor does it easily lend itself to extracting such “principles” from its pages. *Thus to proclaim the gospel means not only to think of the gospel as God’s story, but to think in terms of its historical particularities.* As a classic contemporary example, take the interpretation of Acts 15 as demonstrating the “principle of inclusivity,” when in fact what it reports is the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. The text is manifestly not about the principle of “including” people in general, but about including the Gentiles in particular. But so much of modern preaching sim-

ply ignores the biblical accounts, moving straight from ancient text to modern context. In a culture that wants instant gratification, the temptation to the preacher is to offer immediate application.

The problem is illustrated by the countless Bible study guides and “application” Bibles that focus not on the text of Scripture, but on the reader of the text. Questions such as “Put yourself in the shoes of Peter. How would you feel if you were he?” or “What do you think Theophilus felt as he read the opening words of Acts?” ask for personal response, which can be a good thing, but let’s be clear: such questions often ask people to answer questions for which the text actually provides no answer. And too often neither the text nor the gospel is called upon to guide one’s thinking.

To be sure, the task of the preacher is to discern and proclaim God’s word for our present contexts, but to ignore the concrete particularities of the biblical accounts will often lead to misinterpreting them in our own contexts. The problem is not solved by historical facts about the geography, persons, culture, or Greek words in the text. Rather, preaching should help people locate themselves in the context of the biblical story of God’s creation of the world, call of Israel, sending of Jesus Christ, and promised consummation, because it is there that we find our identity and purpose. Preaching helps people to identify their stories with and submit them to God’s grand story as found in the Bible; to find their identity, meaning, and hope in the purposes of God. Preaching narrates our individual, particular lives into the grand narrative of God’s purposes and work in the world. Often, however, our stories get the banner headlines, whereas God’s story is relegated to small print on the fifth page. It ought to be the other way around: God’s story deserves the banner headline; our little stories deserve far less space.

The grandest headline of all can be found in the announcement that “the Word became flesh.” Thus, *to proclaim the gospel means that exposition of Scripture takes its cue from God’s final revelation in Jesus Christ—not that every sermon is about Jesus.* The gospel that is proclaimed in Christ serves as a prism through which we read and understand all of God’s action in the world. In the gospel we hear of God’s grace towards those who were yet sinners. Is the story really so different elsewhere in the Bible? The accounts of God’s dealings with Israel are, after all, accounts of God’s faithfulness and Israel’s failures, of God’s grace and Israel’s apostasy, of God’s salvation and Israel’s sin.

There are tangible helps to preaching a gospel that has its climactic moment in the incarnation without making that account the content of every sermon. For Christian preachers there is, first, the shape of the canon, which, as the church

SYNOPSIS

Meye Thompson addresses the complex question of what it means to “let the gospel be your guide” in weekly preaching, while at the same time offering a rich and diverse proclamation of the Scriptures, keeping God always as the central character.

Marianne Meye Thompson, professor of New Testament interpretation at Fuller, has been instrumental in developing advanced level interdisciplinary courses that integrate biblical interpretation with other disciplines of the theological curriculum. She is author of *A Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* (The Two Horizons Commentary, 2005), *The God of the Gospel of John* (2001), and *The Promise of the Father* (2000), and coauthor of *Introducing the New Testament* (2001). She has also published numerous articles and reviews in scholarly journals. She was featured on the PBS series *Genesis*, and serves on various editorial boards, including *Theology Today* and *New Testament Studies*.

has received it, bears witness to the gospel: it moves from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to re-creation. Its literal “turning point” is the incarnation, with the move from Malachi’s expected messenger to the announcement that the birth of Jesus is the birth of Immanuel.

The shape of the canon signals to us that the entire gospel is not contained in the New Testament. If you simply look at a printed Bible, you see that the largest portion of Scripture appears before Matthew—an observation that underscores the role of the OT as Scripture and as a witness to the gospel of God. It is a long, slow story, with many an odd twist and turn before reaching the birth of Jesus. The movement from Eden to Egypt and on to the promised land to Babylon and back again is neither inevitable nor natural, but, from beginning to end, is guided by the God who created the world and who will make all things new. We don’t arrive at the end just by dint of the passage of time. No, we wait for the God who created all things to announce “It is done! I make all things new!” The theological heart of the gospel, that God must act for our salvation, comes to expression here—and it is the whole story from Genesis to Revelation. The incarnation serves as the prism through which the whole story is refracted into its many colors.

Another help in preaching the gospel can be found by paying attention to the church calendar. One Reformation

Sunday I attended a church in the Reformed tradition, where one might have expected an explicit nod to the Reformation itself, or perhaps an implicit development of some of its emphases and themes. The sermon text for the day was the healing of the royal official’s son from John 4—not an obvious text for Reformation Sunday, but one that apparently had been given in the lectionary or set by some sermon series. The text narrates one of Jesus’ healing miracles, but the emphasis in the text falls repeatedly on the efficacy of Jesus’ word. Note, for example, how a relatively short text repeats the word that Jesus spoke: “your son will live” (vv. 50, 53), underscores the fact that this word brings life to the dead (v. 51), and shows the proper human response of faith (v. 53). Jesus speaks; the dead live; faith is born—a perfect text for Reformation Sunday, that pays attention to the particularity of the gospel, and emphasizes the power of the word and the response of faith it elicits. Here is a wonderful convergence of the text of John, the Reformation, and the gospel, which would have provided rich food for the congregation.

Instead, the sermon that Sunday contrasted pushiness with persistence: like that official, the preacher argued, you can be persistent without being pushy (although it was never specified what we should be persistent in *doing*). “Be persistent” may be good advice in some situations, but it isn’t the

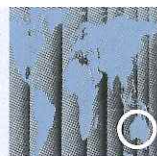
gospel by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, this is what former Fuller professor of preaching, Ian Pitt-Watson, used to call substituting “hints and tips” for the gospel. For here the focus is not on God, or on God’s action, salvation, healing, power, or word, but on what we do. To make matters worse, the particular kind of action counseled by the pastor required nothing from the gospel, the Christian faith, or the Scriptural story to make the point.

Such sleight of hand occurs too often in reading and preaching the Bible. Whereas the text is about the grace, power, and initiative of God, the sermon is about human action and activity. Rarely do the sermon’s active verbs have God as their subject: God sends his Word; God brings life to the dead; God calls for faith. Instead, they have human beings as their subject and are often in the imperative mode: do this, try that. Unquestionably people need and want to know how to live, but in order to provide such guidance preaching should situate our stories in the story of God. It can best do that not by focusing on our story, but by proclaiming, again and again, in all the various ways that the Bible itself does so, the story of God with his world. One way to think of it is to ask whether the sermon focuses on “me” first or whether it focuses on God and, thus, leads me to reevaluate my life, my purpose and destiny. Do I go away thinking about God, his will, his purposes? Does the sermon

do anything that a session with a good therapist could not have done, and probably have done better?

Presbyterian theologian John Leith once wrote a book subtitled *What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say*. This subtitle is an obvious pun: the church “has” as its gift something to say; but the church has that something as its *responsibility* or *obligation* as well. Advice columns can advise people about their problems; therapists can help us in our relationships; but the church can help people to situate their stories in the biblical narrative in a way that illumines their meaning. The church can and must speak the gospel. That is to say, the church articulates what it means that we live in a world created by God, tainted and marred in every way by sin, and straining for redemption.

Preaching the gospel reminds us that we live between Eden and the new Jerusalem, between creation and new creation, praising the faithfulness of God on the one hand and lamenting the ravages of human sinfulness on the other while we wait for God’s remaking of his world. The biblical story explains why the world is the way it is, but the story only has explanatory power when it begins and ends with God. Preaching helps people to understand this story, this “gospel of God,” and to see their own stories as part of the larger story that begins with God’s action and longs for the time when “God will be all in all.” ■



THE STATE OF PREACHING IN . . . **Australia**

A review of preaching in the Australian context by Peter Davis, professor and director for the practice of ministry, Wesley Institute, Sydney, Australia

Preaching in Australia, like most places in the Western world, is undergoing great change. Some of these changes are for the better and some reflect the pressured context in which we minister. The following provides a brief summary of some of the changes the author observes in the Australian context:

1. New Models of Teaching Preaching

In recent years there has been a growing awareness among some Australian homiletics that preaching is best learned by coaching or discipling—or more particularly, through intentional reflection on practice. In this form of learning, the teacher (or coach) and learner work on sermon development together and preaching expertise develops relationally.¹ A small number of theological col-

leges have commenced preaching internships where their best students work with a faculty member for one calendar year. Interns preach most weekends and then meet with the lecturer for reflection in the week that follows. All students continue to do formal preaching classes but it enables flexible and concentrated work with key individuals who have particular gifts in preaching and evangelism. One lecturer has described this approach as the most valuable work that he has done in his teaching ministry because it produces good biblical preachers who go on to give to the wider church—most notably by preaching effectively in their congregations, becoming models for other churches and eventually becoming denominational leaders.

2. Rural Crisis

Churches in rural centres have been in crisis for the last twenty years. There has been a steady decrease in numbers of ministers working in rural settings. This is due to the reluctance of clergy to move from urban areas combined with growing numbers of congregations who have been unable to afford ministers. (Australia is experiencing its worst drought since records commenced in 1910, and many rural communities are under financial strain.) Consequently, there has been growing responsibility

for lay leaders to preach and lead worship. Many congregations have done surprisingly well without a minister to lead them. There has also been a rapid increase in the numbers of non-ordained persons who are employed as pastoral workers. This has resulted in a number of denominations needing to rethink the way in which they both train and appoint pastoral leadership. It has also resulted in creative ways of using new technologies. The Mid-Lachlan DVD project of the Uniting Church prepares a weekly service on DVD for a parish of 18 congregations, but actually sends the DVDs to more than 60 rural congregations. The sermons last 8 minutes and are completed by the listeners through 3-4 discussion questions which they are shown before the sermon. Read more on insights at www.insights.uca.org.au

3. Return to Biblical Teaching

Australia is emerging from a time when preaching was not highly valued in a number of mainline denominations. It has been common for ministers to graduate from theological college only having done one preaching subject and in extreme cases none at all. As a consequence, biblical preaching and evangelism dropped by the wayside. In recent years there has been an

awareness that these have been lacking and some colleges [seminaries] are putting renewed emphasis on effective biblical preaching. This is combined with a commitment to biblical theology, where students are taught to put their exegesis through a biblical theological grid.

4. Emerging Church

Like most Western countries, Australia is being strongly influenced by the emerging church movement. New faith communities continue to emerge where people who don’t want to be “preached at” can experience community, engage with the Bible together, and experience God for themselves. There is a strong emphasis on the arts and an approach to mission which is incarnational rather than attractional.²

There is a clear tension between these last two strands, and it will be interesting to observe the interplay of these movements as they grow in maturity.

1. Allen Demond, “Beyond Explanation: Pedagogy and Epistemology in Preaching,” *Homiletic* 27 no. 1 (2002): 1–12.
2. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2003).



Personality Preaching

A CHURCH IN conflict called me because they were concerned about their lack of progress. I interviewed many of the leaders and members, and one of the recurring complaints was the pastor's poor preaching. The sermons, they said, "wander all around. They seem to have two or three endings and then they just stop."

In a separate incident, a student's only "B" grade in seminary was for preaching, and he could not understand why. I later heard him preach the same sermon the first time, and then again after he had delivered it to several different congregations. The first time the sermon warranted, with grace, a "B-." The last time I heard it, he deserved an "A."

Both the pastor and the overseas worker were poor preachers because neither had come to grips with the influence of their own personalities on their preaching. The personality influences how we generally approach life, including the way a pastor approaches preaching. It may make it easier or harder to preach—but the important thing is to realize how to use personality best and how to correct when the "usual" way of doing leads to poor preaching.

SYNOPSIS

Gorsuch urges preachers to consider the implications of personality on preaching success, pointing out that characteristics such as introversion and extroversion impact the way a sermon is delivered and received.

Reactions to Interpersonal Threat¹

The first question in the box on the following page evaluates how sensitive one is to interpersonal threat. In the two previous examples, each of those people answered "yes" to question 1, that interpersonal situations never threaten them in the least. They were both among the 10% or so of ministers who are perfectly comfortable speaking on any topic to any group at any time with no prior notice. They were never nervous about or scared of how the congregation would react. They may seem, at least to those of us who remain a

bit nervous about every sermon we preach, to be the type of person any preacher would wish to be.

The drawback to being insensitive to interpersonal threat is that there is little internal "push" to prepare a good sermon. Our two examples were equally calm stepping up to preach whether they had taken time to prepare or not. This can make for some bad sermons. The first pastor had wandering sermons because he didn't take time to craft them carefully—or at all. Nor was the opening and closing crafted so as to raise an issue and then come to a conclusion about that issue. The second speaker's sermon only became decent after he had preached it several times because it was originally poorly organized. Each time he preached it again, he revised it as he went. Finally, by the last time I heard him, he had spent enough time to make it really good.

Even if you answered "yes" to the first question, you can motivate yourself to spend the time required to make each sermon really good. For the pastor whose sermons wandered without a clear conclusion, I pointed out clearly why his sermons were poorly received. Then we discussed why sermons are an important part of a minister's work and worth the time to perfect. When I returned to that pastor's church four weeks later, people were talking about his improvement.

Intellectualism

The second question evaluates how well a person works with complex material. Those in the habit of working that way generally carry it over to their sermons. We all know the cliché of a preacher just out of seminary who talks about lofty issues of little concern to the congregation. We who have made that mistake quickly get feedback and change.

But for those who process complex material well, there is a more subtle problem than presenting a seminary paper instead of a sermon. We will often be talking over the heads of many in our congregation. Even without our seminary jargon, our sentences and paragraphs are so complex that many in the pew loose track of what we are saying.

The possibility of talking over the heads of a congregation illustrates the need to take the general background of the person in the pew into account. If our congregants are college graduates, the problem may be minimal. If they are high school dropouts, then it is possible that even those who made only passing grades in seminary are going to have problems communicating to them. For those to whom it does not come naturally, it can be difficult to communicate simply, with the risk of "talking down" to the congregation.

There are three primary elements that influence how simple or understandable a sermon is, and by which we can plan sermons to be more effective. These elements are the number of syllables per word, the number of words per sentence, and the frequency with which the word occurs. The most understandable messages are those with short words, short sentences, and words that are commonly used among the congregation. While this may seem mechanical or simplistic, keeping to short, common words in simple sentences really does help—and is surprisingly difficult for those who are accustomed to complex material.

These three primary elements are useful, in part, because they are easily evaluated. This is particularly true when a sermon is written out in time for evaluation and rewriting. The draft can be scanned for long words, long sentences, and unusual words, and then these can be rewritten.

Some word processors may *appear* helpful because they give the average length of words and the number of words per sentence for the document. However, this is analogous to the river with an average of four feet of depth in which a six foot person drowns: it is not the average but the deepest part of the sermon that gets dangerous. (At least one computer program gives results paragraph by paragraph.²)

It is surprising what one can do while keeping to widely used words. The *New Life Bible* uses only 600 basic words (with their variations) for use by people who speak a minimum of English. It has also been found very helpful with poorly educated groups, such as prison populations. While I would never limit a sermon to using only 600 basic words, examining this Bible can suggest ways in which complex Christian concepts can be communicated in a simpler manner. This Bible also illustrates how to be understandable and yet, unlike some children's Bibles, provides material that is targeted for adult audiences.

In addition to these three simple elements, there is the importance of a clear outline. If there is a manuscript, then it may help to outline the logic (or, even better, have someone *else* outline it to see if they understand your points). Then it can be revised so that the logic is clearer.

The above tools are helpful for reminding preachers of

the problem and providing some help. Being conscious of the problem is the most important part. So if you were a top student in seminary or have a poorly educated congregation, there are ways to make your sermons understandable by your congregation, if you will use them.

Introversion / Extroversion³

The third question separates the introverts from the extroverts. When tired, the extrovert is refreshed by being with other people while the introvert is refreshed by being alone or with a few others. The extrovert hugs people and shouts

Here are several questions that will enable you to better understand how to work with your personal characteristics:

1. If you were asked to give a talk to your peers on five minutes' notice, would you be totally calm?
2. Did you do much better than your peers in seminary, making mostly "A" grades?
3. When you are tired, do you gain more energy from being with others than by being alone?

cheerily across the room to others. The introvert may want to get to know a person before expressing familiarity. Most of us are in the middle, but if you are at either end—the 100% introvert or the 100% extrovert—you will naturally tend to preach only to others like you. You may naturally avoid all hugging, thereby making extroverts feel distanced, or you may naturally hug everyone enthusiastically, making introverts feel uncomfortable. A middle ground involves learning who is an introvert, who is an extrovert, and who is among those at neither extreme.

The danger of being an extreme introvert or extrovert is that we tend to rationalize that which makes us feel comfortable, implying that all Christians should be just like us. "You should enjoy all of these church dinners—it gives us a time for good fellowship" says the extrovert; the introvert is usually too polite to reply "more wasted time because nothing is being done for the Lord." And introverts need to understand that extroverts need these occasions to be enthused about the congregation. Unless we realize these differences, our sermons will miss the people who differ from us.

Other Personal Characteristics

We are all composites of multiple personality characteristics, of which the above are only a few. We must remember that

continued on page 31



Seeing Jesus: Preaching as Incarnational Act

WHAT IS PREACHING meant to do? The question is a timely one. We are hardly living in homiletics' Golden Age, after all. Time-honored forms of preaching are discarded every week, the new and novel grabbed up. What principles should guide such divesting and re-investing? A clear sense of what we are trying to achieve would, at the very least, be helpful. . . . Our own version of the question: What, exactly, do we think we are doing? In an age like ours, it's an important question to ask.

Seeing Jesus

"Sir, we would see Jesus." The reference is to a passage in the Gospel of John. "Some Greeks" apply to Philip for admittance to Jesus' presence (John 12:21). Probably they are there because they want to meet the miracle worker who raised Lazarus from the dead—or maybe they just want a close-up view of Jerusalem's newest hero. Perhaps, though, they have real questions they are anxious to put to Jesus. Perhaps, we might fantasize, they are orators drawn by the power of his words and eager to know the secret of that

power. We don't know, of course. We don't know because John doesn't editorialize, he simply reports the sequence of events. He tells us that Philip takes the Greeks' request to Andrew and the two disciples approach Jesus together. Jesus answers them with a long discourse about his own death and the cost of following him. We never find out what happened to the Greeks.

Their words, however, are immortalized on certain small plaques placed in many modern pulpits. Tacked on along the bottom edge of the lectern, they are designed to catch the preacher's eye as she makes her way into the pulpit. "Sir, we

would see Jesus." Some elder thought it would be a good idea to remind the preacher, perhaps. Or maybe some retiring pastor provided it as advice to his successor. If there is any one sentiment that represents the spirit of the previous generation of preachers, it is the one captured on these little brass plates.

Among the preachers of this generation, reaction to those pious reminders varies widely. Those of us who are not "sirs" have been known to snicker at the sight. Others, coming across one for the first time, report a shiver. Those who have been around many homiletical barns sometimes admit to a feeling of discouragement.

Is this what preaching is meant to do? To help people "see Jesus"? This is preaching's purpose, its *raison d'être*? How can preaching be said to cause, facilitate, or even approximate such a thing? These days, holding the attention of the listeners is as much as many preachers can manage. Is it possible for a twenty-first-century preacher to do more than that? What would it mean to see Jesus, anyway? Even if our sermons could manage to "hold up a picture" of Jesus, what makes us think anyone would care about it, much less be drawn to and changed by it?

Our questions about the nature and purpose of preaching do not have easy answers.

Small plates engraved with a few words lifted out of an ambiguous narrative are of limited use to those of us who fret over the current state of preaching. Who could blame us if we felt a little like those curious Greeks who politely asked for help and ended up standing on one foot and then the other? We are entitled, are we not, to feel a little dyspeptic as, growing frustrated, we glance over at Philip and Andrew's hunched backs.

However impatient we are with the questions contemporary preaching raises in us, we might think twice before taking the screwdrivers to all those brass plates. Before we vandalize the spiritual wisdom of the ancestors, we might hold the words up to twenty-first-century light and ask if "seeing Jesus" has any meaning for us.

Preaching Christ

Lacking a Philip to intercede on our behalf, many of us take our question about preaching's nature and purpose to the Bible, only to find that Scripture has its own ways of talking about preaching. The Bible uses several syntactical settings of the word. Matthew favors the plain-Jane subject and predicate: "Jesus began to preach" (4:17) or "They preach" (23:3). Luke includes kingdom language: Jesus sends the disciples out to "preach the kingdom of God" (9:2). Mark and Paul both seem to lean toward "preach the gospel" (Mark 16:15; 1 Co.17). Though the last turns out to be the most favored combination, New Testament language mandates no one usage. No single syntactical setting for the word "preach" is even heavily favored. Instead, Scripture presents us with a pliable word that may mean slightly different things in different contexts.

However, much of the New Testament's view of preaching is caught up in and held together by one particular phrase: "We preach Christ." The peculiarity of it alone, draws our attention. Richard Lischer has demonstrated "how saturated with Christ that early proclamation was," by listing some of the objects of the New Testament verbs for "preach." He includes "Jesus, Lord Jesus, Christ, Jesus Christ as Lord, Christ crucified, Christ as raised from the dead, Jesus and the resurrection, good news about the Kingdom, Jesus as the Son of God, the gospel of God, Word of the Lord, the forgiveness of sins, and Christ in you—the hope of glory."¹

Among them all, "We preach Christ" is not only the most peculiar but perhaps the most evocative. For some long-time Christians, the mere mention of the phrase stirs memories of old-fashioned church signs, "We Preach Christ Crucified, Risen and Coming Again." There used to be a lot of those signs. There used to be a lot of church lawns displaying the sentiment. And there used to be a lot of kids thinking, "What does that mean?" Does it mean, as some surely assume, that we preach about Christ—about the wounded side, the dewy garden grass, the trumpet sound? Does it mean that we preach in or through Christ—with a spiritual power unique to him, but shared somehow with us? Does it mean that we preach under his banner or his authority? That our words are subject finally to some standard of his? How is it that a person can be preached?

No one would be under any obligation, of course, to pursue such questions or even to give all those old-fashioned signs a second thought, if it weren't for the fact that the slogan is so strategically important in New Testament theology: "We preach Christ." They are the words of no less than the

Apostle Paul. "For seeing that . . . the world through its wisdom knew not God, it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. . . . Jews ask after signs and Greeks after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:21–23). As some old-fashioned congregations have always known, there is more than a soupçon of power and mystery associated with the particular phrase, "We preach Christ." What does it mean?

I think it means that preaching is an incarnational act, paralleling in pattern and process the form of God's self-revelation. If this is true, or at least represents one of the layers of that powerful, enigmatic phrase, it suggests something about both the nature and the purpose of preaching. First, we will consider briefly how incarnational preaching might be defined, and then return to the question of what it is meant to do.

Incarnational Preaching: Christ as Pattern and Process

The parallel between the form of the incarnation and the form of the preacher's work is striking.² For preachers, as for other artists, the creative act is one of collaboration that is quite similar in pattern to the incarnation. Incarnation may be said to happen when two entities come together and produce a third entity which embodies them both and in which the integrity of each is still maintained.³ In the case of Christ, the first two entities were, of course, the two natures, divine and human. The product of their union was Jesus Christ himself. In the case of preaching, the first two entities may be understood as preacher and text or as preacher and Holy Spirit or as preacher and Holy Spirit working through the text and context . . . and the third entity the sermon.

The similarity between the structure of human creative process and the divine creative process involved in the incarnation of Jesus Christ is not only striking but, once one gets used to the definition of incarnation offered above, seems obvious. What is not so self-evident is that what is incarnated in each case is not the material elements we are used to thinking of, or the elements of "substance" spoken of by the ancient church, or even elements of "spirit" more generically defined. What is incarnated in the incarnation and in every act of homiletical creativity is action. As Charles Bartow has so helpfully said, "the Word of God is not *verbum* but *sermo*, not *ratio* but *oratio*. It is lively, face to face aural-oral discourse and suasive action. . . . It is *action divina*, God's self-performance."⁴ In the incarnational view then, preaching Christ means participating in the ongoing action of God, of coming together with and being caught up in the unfolding of God's business at work in the world. In incarnational

SYNOPSIS

Childers argues that the answer to "what is preaching meant to do" is embedded in the question itself: it is meant to do something, to be active. It is meant, she contends, to help people see Jesus.

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preaching, preaching Christ means more than speaking.

Similarly, preaching Christ means more than speaking about Jesus Christ. Christ is more than the content of our preaching. Describing Jesus' personality, explaining Christological doctrine, drawing practical tips for moral living from Jesus' teaching, or rehashing the search for the historical Jesus will not keep anybody awake very long. As Rosenstock-Huessy says, "When we speak about something, we do less than we are expected to do. When we chat about God and the world, our mind is on vacation. And this chatter, gossip, talk is the shell or the chaff of the real and full power of speech when things speak through us."⁵ It is the notion of *throughness* that is important. In this notion we begin to see the parallels between preaching's process and that of the incarnation. In the incarnation, the quintessential example of what Rosenstock-Huessy calls "real and full speech," the Word of God is mediated *through* Christ. Similarly, God spoke *through* prophets and speaks *through* preachers. As the writer of Hebrews says, "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days, God has spoken to us by a Son" (Hebrews 1:2).

It is a simple concept with commonsense appeal. What could be more obvious than to say that whatever it means to "preach Christ" it at least means that the preacher will allow the Word or the Spirit or Something to work *through* him or her? However, the kind of emphasis on *throughness* that we are talking about is not as popular as one might think. In an interview with the *New York Times*, the founding pastor of a well-known mega-church explained the model which informs his ministry. He expressed a particular concern for the loss of the Baby Boom generation from the ranks of church membership, "he said that he had discerned a 'tearing of the fabric' in the 1960s and 1970s, as droves of young people quit church. Now middle-aged with children of their own, they can be coaxed back, he said, if a minister shows them Scripture's relevance to their lives. That means strategizing to discover the right contemporary wrapper (music, for one) in which to present a timeless Gospel message."⁶ Many preachers agree. A better "wrapper" or a smarter marketing strategy is what many are looking for, and of course, they have a point. Presentation is almost everything. There is a great deal to be said for wrappers.

However, next to the contemporary emphasis on the outer aspects of preaching—on "wrapping" or "presentation" or "dressing up" or "curb appeal"—I would like to set an alternative model. The understanding of preaching which emphasizes *throughness* represents a model that is interested in the inner. It is a model which expects preachers to "outer

what they inner." Preachers who understand their craft this way prioritize a skill called "internalization," a discipline which undergirds preachers' attempts to embody the words they speak. Words are not regarded as tools, but as agents of self-disclosure and immediacy. Such preachers believe there should be a match between the words of their mouths and the meditations of their heart. Words and inner experience are congruent, all the time—or as much as is humanly possible. It is this sincere, internalized, natural-sounding speech that provides a faithful vehicle for preaching Christ.

This understanding of what Rosenstock-Huessy called "real" or "full power" speech, is anything but new. It puts to use the ancient insights of actors and prophets—as well as of Jesus' own ministry. It combines the age-old artists' disciplines of concentration, imagination, and observation. It is perhaps best expressed, and certainly most famously represented, in the homiletical theory of a nineteenth-century preacher. But it seems an especially timely word and an appropriate model of preaching for those who must try to get a hearing from the jaded listeners of the twenty-first century.

"Truth through personality"—it was Phillips Brooks, of course, who said it first and best one hundred and twenty years ago. His lectures at Yale called upon preachers to attend to their innards—to let the truth of God *invade* them. "The truth must really come *through* a person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and out of his pen. It must come through his character—his affections—his whole intellectual and moral being."⁷ There are only two kinds of preachers, Brooks believed. "The gospel has come over one of them and reaches us tinged and flavored with his superficial characteristics, belittled by his littleness. The gospel comes through the other and we receive it impressed and winged with all the earnestness and strength that there is in him."⁸

The aspect of Brooks' "throughness" which is most neglected in contemporary preaching is also the one I believe is most potentially helpful to twenty-first-century preachers. It has to do with the performance phase of the "throughness," the end phase, the phase that is about the preacher "being present in the words" as she stands in the pulpit or as they come out of her mouth. In this brief exploration of throughness, I have focused on this aspect not because it is in itself the most important of all the pieces of preaching's process (surely the development of a preacher's character, spiritual formation, ethical reflection, and theological commitments deserve all the time they can get!) but because it is the most neglected, because it has the potential to address this generation's famous criticism of preachers (their apparent lack of



THE STATE OF PREACHING IN . . . Latin America

Jorge Sánchez, adjunct professor of preaching in Fuller Seminary's Hispanic Church Studies Program; pastor of the Spanish ministry at Lake Avenue Church, Pasadena, California

Q: *While it is nearly impossible to generalize about the state of preaching in the vast arena of the Latin American church, can tell us about how things stand?*

JS: If you come from an evangelical background, the definition of preaching involves such things as careful exposition of biblical texts, clear use of logic, use of a coherent outline, and a carefully drawn conclusion. In the Latin American context, that kind of preaching exists, but only in a minority of cases. Here's a story to illustrate the difference between how the church tries to reach people: When I was a pastor in Canada, I met a man from Chile who had been an atheist. He had escaped to Canada from political prosecution. When he arrived in Canada, he got in touch with a Pentecostal church. They hired him to do some painting. One day he was high up on the scaffold when he lost his balance and fell to the ground. To my surprise, he said they did not immediately call 911 as we would do. Instead, the pastor of the church and a group of members rushed to him and began to pray. After a time of intense prayer, the man leapt to his feet completely healed of his injuries. At that moment, he accepted Christ. The man said, "Pastor, I first experienced the power of God, and then I got to know the Word."

In the evangelical church, we try to win people by highly logical and carefully developed sermons. In much of the Latin American church, especially in the Pentecostal and charismatic churches, the church is experiencing amazing growth through God's Spirit working in new ways.

Q: *What place does preaching play, then, in Pentecostal and charismatic churches?*

JS: In these churches, preaching is a component of people's encounter with the living God, working alongside other aspects of ministry, whereas in evangelical churches, it tends to be the main component.

Q: *How would you describe the shape of this kind of preaching?*

JS: Perhaps you have heard of the well-known preacher, Carlos Annacondia. In a hundred years when the history of the church in Latin America is written, they will refer to the church "before Carlos" and the church "after Carlos"—he is *that* important a figure in Latin American Christianity.

Carlos was saved, and three years later as a layman he went to preach the gospel in the slums of Argentina. In 1983 I heard him. His sermon content was like that of a 12 year old boy raised in an evangelical Sunday School. But when he began to pray, he spoke with amazing authority. Dozens of people were

set free from demonic oppressions and many others healed supernaturally. Since then God used him mightily throughout the world and he became a powerful instrument in the growth of the Latin American church. After 20 years, he is still a powerful communicator of the gospel, and of course, the content of his preaching has improved dramatically—on par with any who received training in one of our theological institutions.

In Latin America there is a wave of new churches that are being started by people who have no theological training. But God is using them in powerful ways. This is happening in large segments of the population. In these cases, preaching is a powerful encounter that transforms people's lives and people's situations. The evangelical churches have sermons that are far more like what you and I would recognize as preaching. If we use that as a standard, we would find it hard to locate good preaching because people don't have the proper training for that kind of proclamation. But God is using a great deal of nontraditional preaching to bring people to the faith.

Q: *As teachers of preaching, should we address the fact that much preaching is done without theological training, or should we celebrate the fact that the church is growing so vastly by the inspired proclamation of lay preachers?*

JS: We should be thankful that the Lord is using any type of preaching to bring people to the kingdom; however, if new Christians are fed the same diet of their childhood they will face serious problems in their "adult life" as disciples. Thus, we celebrate the power and the anointing, but we also must strive to help our fellow Christian communicators in Latin America with their study of the Word and the development of solid and relevant Biblical sermons.

Q: *Are there any other things you would like to say to our readers about the state of preaching in Latin America?*

JS: If we are going to speak a relevant word to Latin America in the 21st century, preaching needs to address so many issues, like poverty, oppression, and human dignity. How can we speak a word that matters to the Spanish world? It has to be a word that is relevant to the circumstances of our listeners. Even in Pasadena, when I speak to the Spanish-speaking community, the content of my sermons is vastly different from what an English audience hears. We walk the same streets, but we live in different worlds. We must always contextualize our preaching.

In the Latin American context, we cannot speak of there being a revival in faith, because there has never been a movement to revive. But there is a movement that is bringing the kingdom of God with power. It is a movement that addresses not just the mind, but the whole person, and preaching is a component of this holistic approach. This might not happen in the way that the evangelical world would expect. Depending on the denomination, you will certainly find preachers who practice biblical exposition. But much of the growth is happening without that kind of preaching. It is the foolishness of God that is succeeding to bring the faith in such powerful and unexpected ways to Latin America.

sincerity) and because it suggests an approach that is a better fit for the media-drunk listener.

In summary, an incarnational understanding of preaching suggests that a primary purpose of preaching is *continuity*. Why preach? Because, the incarnational preacher will reply, the gospel wants *continuing*. Not only does it want continuing, it wants continuing in lived experience—in the acts of real people, preachers, and listeners. Alla Bozarth-Campbell describes it this way, “In making the word to become flesh, the interpreter makes herself or himself into the word, takes the word as poem into her or his body, continues the creation process begun by the past.”⁹ Bozarth is speaking, from a literary point of view or an oral interpretation theory point of view, about allowing the word of the text to achieve “bodily entelechy” in the preacher, but the same may be said to be the goal of preaching in a more general sense. The listeners are meant to embody the Word too—right down the aisles and out into the world. It is in this sense then, that the purpose of preaching is a certain kind of action. One might say the purpose of preaching is to make something happen. The kind of thing that “something” turns out to be is not unimportant. But it is not nearly as important as making this distinction: preaching’s purpose is not defined in terms of ideas, but of action.

Preaching is not static. It is not a thing. It is an act the purpose of which is to kick off the chain of cause and effect, to tip the end domino, to set in motion motion. Of all the kinds of movement preaching is interested in (and there are many—integrating personality and spirituality, inspiring love, comforting, producing belief, reinforcing faith, maintaining communion, stiffening sinews, conforming to the image of Christ, to name just a few personal favorites), there is one that is chief above and precedes all others, one that is the first step which leads on to the others.

Openness

P. T. Forsyth puts it best, “God is not really opened to me till He opens me to Him. All this is possible if (preaching) be much more than declaration. It must be an act. Christ spoke far less of love than he practiced it. He did not publish a new idea of the Father—rather He was the first true Son.”¹⁰

Openness is the kind of movement preaching is interested

in before it is interested in any other. In some theological traditions, openness is regarded as the one thing human beings have to offer God; in others God supplies even this. But whether a preacher is addressing Wesleyans or Calvinists, the preaching task is the same. To preach Jesus Christ is to allow God’s Word to work through one’s own personality and expressiveness in such a way that both preacher and congregation are opened.

We started with the question about what preaching “is meant to do.” The word choice turns out to be significant. Perhaps when we put the matter more academically—“how does one define the purpose of preaching?”—we are more easily tempted toward abstraction. But the question, as we have posed it, contains something of its own answer. Preaching is indeed meant to do something. It is meant to make something happen. It is meant to open us or, at the very least, open our eyes.

“Sir, we would see Jesus.” When Philip and Andrew told Jesus what the Greeks had asked, Jesus replied, “The hour has come for me to be glorified.” May it be so. ■

[This excerpt from “Seeing Jesus: Preaching as an Incarnational Act” from Jana Childers’ book *Purpose of Preaching* (2004) is used by permission of Chalice Press, Saint Louis, Missouri.]

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 73.
2. See, for example, Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1941).
3. This definition of *incarnation* represents a combination of the views of Alla Bozarth-Campbell, *The Word’s Body: An Incarnational Aesthetic of Interpretation* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979), and Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).
4. Charles L. Bartow, *God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 26.
5. Eugen Rosenstock-Heussy, *Speech and Reality* (Norwich: Argo Books, 1970), 120.
6. Gustav Niebuhr, *New York Times*, April 18, 1995, A10.
7. Philips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 120.
8. Ibid.
9. Bozarth-Campbell, *The Word’s Body*, 52.
10. P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 349.

On Black Preaching

A FUNERAL IS probably not the best context in which to reflect on the state of preaching, but when you are seated in a large sanctuary with over one hundred preachers between you and the platform, it conjures up images of years of life in the trenches of pulpit preaching.

At one such recent funeral, it became clear early on that it was a glorious celebration of a life lived abundantly. When African Americans milk an old hymn, it throbs with fresh energy; the same happens when spirituals are sung, and they impact you as if they had been composed yesterday.

Then there was the preaching. Several sermons were given during the festivities under the rubric of “comments.” The keynote sermon was, however, fitted to the occasion. It was preaching in the black tradition, and everyone there knew it, felt it. And here the reflection kicked in: what is there about this tradition that makes it so enduring, and so warmly received? It began with the text, which was read slowly, each word given its due recognition in the preacher’s rhythmic cadence. By the time the sermon’s title was announced, and repeated for emphasis, it was clear that the sermon would be grounded in the text. King James Version.

A congregation of African Americans may be sprinkled with an educated elite, professionals from across a wide spectrum, but the expectation is that a preacher will honor the Bible as the only legitimate starting point for a sermon. Anything less than this is a nice talk. Of course a starting point is just that, and from there anything can be said; preachers do some strange things with a biblical text, and black preachers are no exception. This seems to be the case especially among television preachers or pastors of so-called megacongregations. These ministries, elephantine in size, require a lot of hay and supplements to taste good. But all of these preachers begin with a biblical text. Why? Because black people expect to hear the Bible preached. Why? Because they still think it is the word of God.

Then too, African Americans are still tethered to a cultural apparatus that values sound, and the rhythm of words,

and words. A black preacher is a wordsmith, an artist who paints with words, whose palate is a mix, often a flamboyant mix, of color and texture. Even in an auditorium replete with all the latest gadgets of big screen sophistication, the focus is on the pulpit. Bishop Jakes may walk all over the platform, but the spotlight is still on him and his every word. He may do some strange things with a biblical text, and he does, but his audience never doubts that he derives his authority from the word of God.

Black preachers know the value of emotion in preaching. The good ones, such as the legendary Dr. Gardner Taylor of Harlem, preach like poets, shunning the use of words to merely convey information and choosing words that lay bare the emotions in the text and in the lives of their listeners. This sets the audience free to respond emotionally, where give and take between preacher and pew becomes the essence of communication. Pity the preacher who gets no such feedback. And heaven help the one who bores his congregation to silence even with a grand text.

The issue of authority is crucial in black preaching. It derives in large part from the reverence black people have for the Bible, but also from a longstanding reverence for the preacher. “Didn’t he say it” may be a reference to some word in the text, or it may be a recognition that the preacher in the text was being heard. The black tradition in listening to sermons equates the voice of God with the person speaking in the text. It moves from there to the person in the pulpit. The audience will be attuned to both text and human agency.

Black preachers have had to endure a heavy burden in caring for the churches, but also in being a bridge between

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SYNOPSIS

Pannell defines some of the characteristics of a cultural form of preaching that values the word, but also the sounds, the rhythms, and the emotions of words. A Black preacher, he contends, must be a wordsmith and even a poet. But above all, he or she must have authority.



Is There a Crisis in Preaching?

PEOPLE OFTEN ask, “What do you think about the crisis in preaching?” As a teacher of homiletics, it seems clear why they might seek my opinion; but, in truth, I have no greater knowledge of whether a crisis in preaching exists than any other churchgoer. Now that I teach instead of preaching regularly in a church, I attend a church that has faithful preaching. No crisis there. In my travels, I usually listen to myself as a guest preacher. (I leave it to others to gauge the level of crisis there.) When I hear the preaching of Fuller’s students, I get a fair sense of the rhetorical and theological talent that God is calling into the ministry. But that is no indicator of how faithful they will be in the hard work of preparing and delivering biblical sermons in the future, nor of whether they will still be in the ministry five years after

graduation. There does seem to be a crisis regarding keeping talented pastors in service. But a crisis in preaching? That is hard to judge. Still the issue keeps coming up.

It became a matter of earnest consideration when I met one distressed young woman in our Foundations of Ministry class. This is the basic ministry class for beginning Master of Divinity (MDiv) stu-

dents in which they are introduced to various aspects of their upcoming training. After giving a presentation on what they could expect when they took homiletics (or introduction to preaching), this woman asked the following question: “Why is there so much bad preaching out there?” I winced. Not because I took credit for turning out lousy preachers, although we homileticians probably all deserve our share of the blame. I winced because I did not know the answer to her simple, direct question. I do know how to teach people to be faithful preachers. But I don’t know what happens to

those who become ineffective preachers between the time they leave the seminary and when they begin to disappoint listeners. The young woman followed up her question with me after class. The urgency of her inquiry became clear to me when our discussion about her inability to find a church where the Word was proclaimed brought her to tears. That incident has stayed with me and has motivated me to investigate the issue with as many as will engage the question. I have discussed this with pastors in the U.S. and abroad; I have inquired about the issue with groups of lay people; I have discussed it with a class of military chaplains, and have considered the issue with fellow homileticians. None of us is able to declare decisively that there is a crisis in preaching. But each group has been useful in helping me assess potential reasons for ineffective preaching in the places where it occurs. Is there a crisis in preaching? The only clear answer seems to be that if a believer seeks to find a church where the Word of God is proclaimed and is unsuccessful in finding one, *there is a crisis for her*. That is serious enough an issue for us to consider the possible causes of ineffective preaching and to make some suggestions as to how things can improve. On a positive note, those who preach well may be interested to hear what these voices have to say as a way of reinforcing the faithful work they are doing. By considering things that lead to ineffective preaching, they may see in theirs the photo-negative of good work and faithful proclamation.

The ideas that follow have been developed through my conversations on the topic. I began with a small set of hypotheses as to why there is ineffective preaching. Then each group I spoke with has confirmed my assumptions and added some of their own. I call these hypotheses because they are untested by analysis. We have not tested whether there is a crisis in preaching, nor done a survey as to why things go awry in the pulpit. These guesses are not scientific. They are honest responses by preachers and listeners regarding an issue that all have responded passionately about. It may be troubling to realize that so many people have had

something to say about why preaching is ineffectual. On the other hand, it is refreshing to know that so many lay and clergy feel the urgent need to address the state of preaching in the church. I am grateful for their insights and share them in the hope of fostering further conversation about the state of preaching and encourage better practice by those who find themselves in the hypotheses that follow.

Before I list these hypotheses, a word about “bad preaching.” Whether preaching is good or bad is such a subjective issue, I choose to avoid the term altogether. What one person calls bad may be theologically and biblically sound, yet simply uninteresting. What some might call good may be riveting entertainment, but hollow scripturally and theologically. I prefer to use the terms ineffective and ineffectual so as to be clear about the product. If preaching is not working, there should be some way to assess where it goes amiss, even if it is doing some things well. Likewise, I avoid the term “good preaching.” This comes from my theological conviction (completely Barthian) that the best a preacher can do is *attempt* to preach. It is only by God’s blessing through the presence of the Holy Spirit that our attempts become proclamation. In other words, it is not within our control to create a good sermon. If it *is* good, it is a gift of grace. If it is brilliant in conception and execution but devoid of God’s blessing, it cannot be effective. The term I prefer is “faithful preaching.” While preachers are not in charge of whether God will use our sermons for good purpose, we are entirely in charge of whether we do faithful work in preparation and delivery. If we serve faithfully, we are creating the best possible tools for the Holy Spirit to use. Let God make good use of our work if God wills. Let us simply be true to our call, to work diligently to proclaim God’s Word to a church that is quite literally crying to hear a Word from the Lord.

Hypotheses Regarding Ineffective Preaching

1. *Preachers forget what they have been taught about faithful preaching.* Or, they have not been well trained in the basic work of textual exegesis and interpretation, contextual analysis, rhetorical composition, and delivery. The solution is to read excellent books on the fundamentals of preaching and learn from wise writers the basic elements of sermon construction and presentation. Even faithful preachers need to “sharpen the saw” by refreshing homiletical reading. (A suggested bibliography is included later in this issue.)

2. *Preachers become too busy (or lazy) to attend to the work of faithful preaching.* The issue of laziness is an issue of spirituality and should be addressed through prayer and, perhaps, spiritual direction. But the issue of business is the bane

of all ministers of the Word. God calls us to many important ministry tasks as pastors and it is difficult to set priorities; yet preaching is chief among our responsibilities. Let preaching be a priority in the weekly schedule, and let congregations understand that in order to preach effectively, their pastors need time to pray, study, meditate, cogitate, create, read, write, re-write, and practice, as well as Sabbath time to let the sermon settle and become internalized. One more word about laziness: some preachers are so gifted that they are able to speak well with little preparation. Peter Storey, a Methodist Bishop from South Africa and a chief combatant in the church’s fight against apartheid, confessed that he had been given such a gift and abused it early in his ministry. He reports that “God took that gift away.” From then on, he learned that preaching well was a matter of careful, prayerful, and focused work. He is an exemplary preacher today, more through hard work than even his rhetorical gifts.

3. *Preachers reach the point in ministry where they think what they have to say is more relevant than what the Scriptures have to say on a subject or issue.* This is perhaps the greatest danger for preaching. How does one call a preacher back from the brink of such hubris? This may not be a common concern, but there are pastors who dispense psychological suggestions, lectures on morality, and self-help advice under the guise of preaching. Homiletician Richard Lischer has said that God’s people will only trust what preachers have to say when they are convinced that it is the Word of God.¹ What the church needs from pastors is the humility to empty themselves before the Word and seek God’s response to the needs of their people. There are times and places for pastoral opinion. The pulpit is reserved for God’s opinion.

4. *Preachers have a lack of rhetorical skill or creativity.* Every experienced preacher knows God can use poor delivery or a badly shaped message for good purpose. We are grateful when the Holy Spirit shows up even if we don’t. But God expects us to use all our skill and capacity for learning new techniques to make sermons as effective as possible. Bishop William Willimon once prayed, “God, forgive us for making the Gospel boring.” There are numerous books that can guide preachers in bringing creativity to their work.

5. *Preachers treat the sermon as an event of human communication rather than the living proclamation of God’s Word.*² This indicates a failure of theology. St. Paul makes it clear repeatedly in his writings that preaching is God’s Word. The reformers knew it and relied upon it. Barth insisted on it,

SYNOPSIS

Schmit attempts to stimulate conversation among preachers and listeners, investigating whether there is a crisis in preaching, and reminding all that the care of the faith of the people of God hangs in the balance.

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and Bonhoeffer declared that “the proclaimed word is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word.”

Preachers with the opposite view may find voices to support them. One teacher of preaching has said, “When the speaker is in touch with God and then exposes his or her God-filled heart in a moving public address, God can go to work there.”³ Certainly, this is true, but it is no substitute for praying over a text and listening for God’s leading as you work the Scriptures to reveal the voice of the living God. The sermon is God’s Word, not the occasion for undisciplined, heartfelt testimonial. While God may choose to work in unexpected ways—even in textual sermons that are dull, unimaginative, or poorly constructed; or in testimony and devotional talks—we do not presume that God is in our human speech. Because all preaching is an attempt at proclamation, preachers need to make the most faithful attempt and ground their work in Scripture in order that God might inhabit their words and make them God’s human speech.⁴ The best solution for this concern may be for preachers to prayerfully reexamine their theology of preaching and their sense of call. Ordained ministry is Word and Sacrament ministry. Reading Karl Barth’s small book on preaching, *Homiletic*, may help to readjust one’s theological perspective.

6. *Preachers omit the promise of God’s love and turn sermons into ethical discourse.* Here is another theological issue. From Augustine, who wrote the first book on preaching, onward, we have seen the need to balance the law and

the gospel in preaching. If preachers omit the good news and simply preach the law, sermons become moralistic harangues. The truth is that people don’t need preachers to tell them how bad they are. They know that better than we do. What people need is assurance of God’s love and the benefits that are part of God’s grace. In 2 Corinthians, Paul says, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (5:17). We can become better people because of Christ who saves us and empowers us to be new creations. We cannot achieve it on our own. Sermons need to announce this. Peter Storey once gave this advice to preachers: “The night before you preach, read through your sermon. If it doesn’t contain good news, throw it away!” Preachers needing a review of how to balance law and gospel in sermons or a description of the dangers of moralist preaching can find excellent treatments in Richard Lischer’s *A Theology of Preaching*.

7. *Preachers assume that the listener is responsible to get the message.* Proclamation of the Word is the preacher’s responsibility. While preachers may hope people listen to all they say, when the sermon is uninteresting, preachers make it difficult for people to hear the Word. We need to be grateful for the work of the Holy Spirit who achieves the amazing goal of getting people to church in the first place. Luther said that the Holy Spirit “gathers” us together. Preachers need to take it from there. Some people come with sleep-filled eyes, others struggle with their children to arrive on time. Some have hangovers, others are worried or depressed. Preachers cannot expect people to take responsibility for being attentive for twenty or thirty minutes on top of that. We need to learn to

are bombarded with words delivered to us in every conceivable form—on TV and radio, iPod and CD, books and papers, Internet and e-mail, magazines and newspapers. This amounts, so to speak, in a dilution of the meaning and significance of words. As a result, there is a loss of confidence in written and spoken words in general and a severe crisis in confidence in religious language in particular. This process in Europe is reinforced by an ongoing process of secularization.

2. Challenged by this crisis of language, churches and preachers seek aid in communicating the gospel by using new technologies to accompany their messages. Film clips, dynamic graphics, PowerPoint presentations are expected to catch and hold the congregation’s attention. But there is hardly any theological reflection on the impact of this shift in the principle of communication from the verbal to the visual. We still have to relate the new technical challenges and possibilities to Paul’s

create enough interest to capture listener’s imagination and hold it. There is much published advice about writing evocatively and bringing the sermon alive in delivery. The solution here, again, is to take advantage of the many good resources that teach preachers to be creative and interesting.

8. *Preachers use the pulpit to seek their “fifteen minutes of fame.”* Andy Warhol was prescient when he predicted that countless ordinary people would have brief moments of glory, and even feel an entitlement to fame as a TV game show host, contestant on *American Idol*, subject of a televised makeover, or star in a *Survivor* episode. Nowadays, it is easy for any minister to self-publish books and sell them to promote their churches and their ministry.

The temptation for preachers is to be known as great preachers. But that is not our calling. God may need a few well-known preachers to broadcast the Word. But most are called to do the humble, faithful work of preaching in local congregations, small to middling, and to feed the flocks God has given us in those places. To repeat, preachers should not seek to be good, but to be faithful. The prayer for humility is a necessary one for those who proclaim God’s Word.

9. *Preachers fail to perceive the world accurately or to retrieve images as needed for sermon use.* Preachers must be like poets, always observing what is going on in the world, using their senses to see clearly and capture life to be recalled later when needed. Poets know how vivid descriptions of real-life incidents bring life to their work. Preachers must do the same, seeking sermon illustrations constantly. Let us

statement that “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

3. The “classical” elements of Christology have come under the attack of historical critical inquiry from the Enlightenment and onward. Since then we had several stages in the “Quest for the Historical Jesus.” An awareness of history made it impossible to speak in an uncomplicated way about Christ as the second person of the Trinity, his preexistence, his divinity, or his position in heaven. The results of scholarly research affected not only those in academic circles, but also people in European churches. Popularized versions of high-profile publications have spread the results of the “quests” widely in local congregations. But while New Testament scholars are on their way with yet a “third quest,” which returns to a more traditional view of Scripture, there is a time-lag in congregations where the “second quest” and Rudolf Bultmann’s skepticism about Scripture are still influ-

learn to describe the world in such a way that our sermons become real enough for listeners to recognize and to engage. This is one of the key ways to make sermons interesting.

One of the people preachers love to quote is Mark Twain. This is not because of his theological insight. It is because he was a superb observer of the human condition. Preachers can learn this art in a most natural way. Read great books. See good movies. Spend time just looking at the beauty, or the struggle, or the pain around you. Store the images of those observations in the library of your memory and check those vivid images out as needed when you seek to speak truthfully about the world.

10. *Preachers can fail to believe the message they are called to proclaim.* This can happen to anyone. All believers are assailed with doubts from time to time. Pastors and preachers are no different. Some may even suffer from the notion that God cannot forgive them for some great sin. If the preacher is in a place where he or she cannot speak God’s Word with conviction, listeners may well feel that their sermons lack authenticity. To be in such a spiritual state is no shame. Most Christians benefit from spiritual counsel from time to time. Pastors can search out trusted colleagues to serve as confessors and confidants. Their preaching will ring with conviction when they have been assisted through their own faith struggles. It may even improve because they have come to understand the spiritual struggles of their people.

11. *Preachers may fear to speak prophetic words.* Most people want to be liked. No one likes to bear bad news.

ential in the practice of preaching. This is especially clear in European sermons on texts from the Gospels.

4. European preachers typically embody a blend of traditional views (inherited from childhood), of theological liberalism (adopted during college and seminary years), of postmodernism (as the air breathed in contemporary society), and of evangelical sensibilities (inspired by their work in congregations, especially with youth). Preachers often do not adopt or feel at home with one of these labels (be it classical or contemporary, orthodox or liberal). The impression I have of European preaching is that none of these elements is the object of reflection, nor is the blend of the different perspectives considered. This un-reflected blend causes a lack of theological clarity in preachers and in the content of their sermons. The result is a kind of uncertainty, shyness, and hesitation in preaching that can be felt today in almost every mainline denomination in Europe.



THE STATE OF PREACHING IN . . . Europe

By Rein Bos, adjunct faculty of the practice and theory of preaching at the Protestant Theological University (Utrecht, The Netherlands); pastor of the Protestant Church in Putten, The Netherlands

European preaching faces some fundamental issues and critical questions at the beginning of the 21st century. Some of these issues are specifically European; others are global in character but with a distinctive European flavour.

1. Preaching today happens in a culture where people are surrounded by more words than any previous generation in human history. This is true for both the Europeans and Americans. We



Sometimes, however, the word God needs to have proclaimed is a word of challenge. The gospel message is one of grace, but it is also one that can jar us out of complacency or inactivity. When such a word is needed, preachers can take refuge in a technique mastered by William Willimon. He says that on occasion, he hides behind the text. He pushes God's Word out and cowers behind it. If people say to him on the way out of church, "Pastor, I really disagreed with you today," he delights in saying: "You don't disagree with me. You disagree with Jesus." Of course, to do this, you need to do your exegesis well, in order to trust that what you said was what Jesus wanted.

12. *Preachers may conclude that they are finished with sermon preparation too soon.* The temptation in writing sermons is to stop when you have determined what to say. This moment may occur when you have achieved a solid outline or the first draft of a manuscript. But wise preachers know that we seek not only what to say, but how to say it in the best way. Achieving that level of preparation means careful editing, re-writing, and ample practice of the delivery. These things take time. Those who write their sermons on Saturday night do not have time to bring the message to a proper finish. Solution: plan your week well and start early enough to attend to the end-game. This can make all the difference between a sermon that is highly effective and one that is flat or dull. As a simple reminder, think of the sermon the way poets think about the poem. Stephen Dobyns puts it this way: "Best words, best order."

13. *Preachers may not trust the power of language to achieve their goals.* Everyone, it seems, is telling preachers today that words have lost their power. This is simply untrue. Words are the preacher's basic tool. We need to trust that they will carry the freight of God's Word as they always have. PowerPoint and moving images may add sparkle or finesse to a preacher's presentation, but they are no substitute for carefully crafting our language so as to speak with clarity, precision, and depth. Well-told stories and illustrations that use evocative, sensory language convey meaning and truth today as well as ever. I not only disbelieve the lie that says young people do not listen to words or stories today, I have developed a little scheme to prove it in my preaching classes. At certain points in my lectures, I purposely use stories and evocative language, much as I suggest we do in preaching. Then, at those times when my mostly young audience leans forward in anticipation of how a story will end, or when they listen so intently as to create one of those pin-drop moments, I

call them on it. I draw their attention to the fact of their rapt attention. It disproves anything they might hear about not trusting words. Then I adjure them to trust words in their own work and learn how to use them with precision and power.

14. *Preachers may not know what it means to preach faithfully.* One of the most frustrating things we can be asked to do in life is to excel at something we don't know how to do. This can be the problem with preaching. When I graduated from seminary, I knew how to write a sermon according to the rules given in my preaching class. But I did not know what it meant to write a good sermon. I knew one when I heard one, but had no idea of how to cook one up myself. When I began to teach preaching, I made a point of helping students understand what it means to do faithful work in sermon preparation. I teach that they should strive to be faithful in five areas. When they have done so, they ought to have an effective sermon. These five areas are: careful work with the scriptural text, deep understanding of the context or audience to whom they will speak, solid understanding of theology, and engagement of the minds and hearts of the audience. There are many issues involved in being faithful to these tasks, but they boil down to manageable activities. For those who need remedial help in these areas, the bibliography holds many resources.

Conclusion

These hypotheses about the state of preaching may be difficult to prove. Some of them may be more apt than others. Some may simply be false guesses. They are offered as a way to stimulate thought and conversation among preachers and listeners. And there may be many more reasons why preaching fails. My prayer is that preachers commit or recommit themselves to faithful work in preparation for preaching. Nothing less is at stake than the faith of the people God places in their care. How can they believe if someone does not preach to them? With faithful work, any crisis that exists in preaching can be overcome, one pulpit at a time. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1992), 48.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Proclaimed Word," in *Theories of Preaching*, ed. Richard Lischer (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1987), 28.
3. Joseph Webb, "A Reply, both Academic and Personal, to Paul Scott Wilson's 'Radical Postmodern: A Prophetic Ethics,'" in *Academy of Homiletics Papers*, Homiletics Academy Meeting, December, 2004, Memphis, Tennessee, p. 242.
4. Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

Preaching Arts in Emerging Churches

Fuller Theological Seminary PhD candidate in preaching Lisa Lamb interviews Eddie Gibbs on preachers in the various worlds of churches emerging in our times.

Q: *What is your mood as you look out at preaching in the church today?*

EG: What excites and encourages me is that I sense a great hunger, in the church and beyond it, to hear and engage in the Word of God. I get discouraged when I hear so much preaching that makes it sound like God is speaking somewhere else in a previous age. This is the classic expositor, still using a rather wooden style, spending frankly too much time in commentaries, and not enough time listening to the congregation.

I also am concerned about the purely topical preacher. This style quickly runs out of gas. It's hard to pull the rabbit out of the hat every week. It is need driven and doesn't challenge priorities. It has also contributed to the biblical illiteracy of our generation.

But when I see preachers today working hard to incarnate the word in the life of the congregation, letting this word becoming white hot within the context of this community, I see congregations responding eagerly to the invitation to engage that word.

Q: *What are some other marks of these incarnational preachers?*

EG: They are attuned to the narrative dimension of Scripture, and are less propositional. They are less caught up in the modern pursuit of defending the Bible, and more in touch with premodern sensibilities, letting the word speak to us from the first century.

Incarnational preachers tend to be tapped in to their cultural context. They are not domesticating the text so that it confirms the assumptions of a church subculture. They are writing to be heard, not read and analyzed. They say one thing well. They tell stories well, and they can handle the big things of life; they're not dealing in trivia.

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Q: *What is the gospel that tends to get preached in North America today?*

EG: It is consumerist, individualistic, and based in meeting needs, rather than calling people to live in a radically different way. Preachers don't assume that God wants to speak to them corporately. We need to ask, "What is the appropriate response we as a community should make to this word?" We assume the response is a private one. I am also concerned too that we are not preparing people to live within a society that is neo-pagan and post-Christian.

Q: *What do you mean by neo-pagan and post-Christian?*

EG: By neo-pagan I mean that in our pluralistic Western society we have a syncretistic spirituality, a "mix and match," and we don't know how to relate to this environment. It will require a bold yet sensitive witness. You can't just say, "the Bible says." You've got to show that the message the Bible brings is of incredible relevance: not that it fits, but that it raises all kinds of disturbing and exciting questions for our time.

When the church was a central pillar of society, we could simply ask people to come in and hear the word proclaimed, to join us on our terms. The seeker-sensitive movement rode the last part of the wave, but it has pretty much dried up. Now we're just recycling the saints. If you are successful in that environment, you can get a big audience. But where does that leave all the others? To reach them, we'll need to avoid church-speak. Here's an exercise: ask someone who is brand new to use a 3x5 card and jot down all the words that were completely lost on them.

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Gibbs maintains there is much in preaching today, as it is practiced by the emerging churches, that is worthy of excitement and encouragement. Preachers are incarnating the word, he claims, and congregations are responding eagerly.

Q: *What happens to our preaching when we fail to engage the culture?*

EG: I see a strand of preaching in North America that flows out of deep insecurity, defensiveness, and sublimated anger. Preaching becomes an end point, not an invitation to a dialogue. This simply won't work today.

Young people today are the products of globalization, and they perceive the world so differently. Their culture is based on network and empowerment, not hierarchy. They are highly aware of tensions and ambiguities. That means the preacher can't be like Moses coming down from the mount. You don't impose, you propose. You ask, "Isn't this intriguing?"

We need to learn from the way Jesus and the early church communicated. We go to the Bible for our message, but not often enough for our method. If we did, here's what we'd find: God is a multimedia communicator. He communicates by plunking you in situations and seeing what you learn from it. And he asks so many questions! Jesus was the master of the one-liner; he didn't need to tie up all the loose ends. He left things buzzing around in people's heads.

Q: *You were originally hired as the Donald A. McGavran Professor of Church Growth. The Church Growth movement has come under some attack in recent years—by those advocating ethnic diversity and those opposed to its "marketing" tendencies. How would you evaluate the movement today?*

EG: Unfortunately, as the Church Growth movement became popular in North America, it focused on technique, and we lost sight of the profound insights of Donald McGavran. His early writing was pushing people out of their secure mission stations to build the bridges of God into the society around them and to sensitively birth faith communities within their cultural context. Churches here used his missions insights as marketing principles. They rejoiced that their churches were growing as they applied the principles, but they didn't ask, "Where is the transformation?"

My hope is that the Church Growth movement is still to come into its own. The Americanization of it corrupted it, but McGavran is still right! He was a child of his age, and he got some things wrong. He defined mission too narrowly, and he too closely identified church and kingdom. But he grasped this idea that you've got to be a movement, to be on the move. And he understood the need to think in terms of sociological maps, not just geographical ones. Churches must be birthed within a culture and allowed to look different in its context. How will we reach the clubbing culture in

England? Sixty percent of people 18–35 are in the clubbing culture. We'll need to birth a church in the clubbing culture. There won't be a band up front, but a DJ.

Q: *Tell us your thoughts on the "emerging church" scene today.*

EG: For starters, the term "emerging church" has been hijacked. Every church is an emerging church, because it is not yet the kingdom. How can one church proclaim itself to be emerging in contrast to others? Still, the term is useful in that much of the church today is stuck and dysfunctional. We need to move out of institutional modes to become a more organic, missional church. Church is not a place I go to but a community to which I belong. In a missional church, the leaders are resourcing the congregation for their ministry in the world. We train pastors and teachers, but have a chronic shortage of apostles, prophets, and evangelists, who communicate good news on the frontier.

What those thinking about emergent churches grasp is that the Bible is the most exciting book in the world, and we need to present it in ways that speak today. We're no longer the culture of the orator; we're the culture of the artist. We need to learn from Africa how to be better storytellers. Visual media can also be highly effective, but they can be gimmicks, excuses for laziness.

Q: *What are your top three book recommendations for preachers today?*

EG: I recommend anything by N. T. Wright and Dallas Willard.

David Henderson's book, *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World*, is excellent.

Ron Boyd-MacMillan's new book, *Explosive Preaching*, is fascinating. He brings his background as a journalist to the sermon task.

Q: *What practices have helped you the most over forty-five years of preaching?*

EG: I still love and use the Scripture Union Notes; it's a program that gets one engaged every day with Scripture, in a five-year cycle. It's an invitation to reflect devotionally on the Word. When we open the Bible as preachers, we are looking for a sermon. I work hard to respond first with prayer. We spend so much time analyzing Scripture, and not enough time answering its summons. For preachers, prone as we are to mining texts for their sermon potential, our first response to Scripture needs to be prayer. ■



THE STATE OF PREACHING IN . . . Africa

Clay Schmit talks with Moses Pulej, PhD candidate in theology and culture, Fuller Seminary

Q: *The church in Africa is growing exponentially. What role is preaching playing in this growth?*

MP: African church growth is directly linked to preaching because of the importance of public speaking in African traditions, where people are elected into high office because they are good orators. A good speaker, sometimes lacking sound biblical interpretation, is likely to have a big church.

Q: *What are the problematic biblical interpretation and theological content issues in African preaching?*

MP: In most big cities of sub-Saharan Africa revival style preaching, popularly known in Africa as "Crusades," are the norm. The advertisements for these services tell it all: big posters are displayed everywhere on the city streets asking people to come and receive their miracle. The miracles include healing from every disease, even HIV/AIDS. In addition they promise wealth and a good life. These preachers claim that health and wealth is what God has in store for every believer. All one needs is to have enough of the right faith and God will deliver on every desire of the person's heart. These preachers have turned the gospel into a divine insurance policy. The message of these preachers is taken to heart by people living in dire poverty. The promise of wealth flaunted by preachers makes it too difficult for people to reject the message. The tragedy here is that people are turned from the true worship of God to the worship of a golden calf.

Q: *Can you give examples of how these strange theological ideas are affecting the church in Africa?*

MP: There are two things that come to mind. First, leaders in some megachurches provide immediate wealth for a person in the church—such as buying a car or house. That person gives a testimony of how God has blessed them by answering their prayers. The other way these strange ideas are affecting the church is by American preachers coming to hold big revivals. At these events, people claim healing from all kinds of illness. The revivals are then broadcast in Africa and all over the world. A few years ago I attended one such prayer meeting where an American television evangelist was preaching. During the preliminary set up time he came and tested the public address system by asking people if they could hear him to raise their hands. People raised their hands, saying "yes, yes, yes." At the end of the service he asked those who needed to be saved or healed to raise their hands and only a few hands went up. After some time in prayer he asked those who were healed to lift up their hands; again very few hands went up. Several months later I saw a broadcast of the same revival meeting, and when those healed were asked to raise up their

hands, everyone in the stadium did so—obviously a case of false editing. When television viewers see huge numbers claiming to have been healed or saved, it gives proponents of this theology credibility. Some are even selling "special anointing oil" with labels that state it is not ordinary oil but "the Holy Spirit mysteriously packaged in a bottle."

Q: *In what areas are these problems most notable?*

MP: As I continue to research it seems this kind of preaching is rampant in most of Africa. But the countries which seem to have numerous preachers of the health and wealth gospel are Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa.

Q: *Are there places in Africa where the gospel is being rightly proclaimed? Who are the people (or churches) bringing the true gospel to light?*

MP: Countering the message of health and wealth is a smaller group of preachers, who see their role as preaching the good news in the midst of bad news. These preachers are doing what we in theological circles call "inculturation." Inculturation is the attempt to root the good news of Jesus Christ in African hearts and minds. They take African culture into consideration and seek an African speech about God. These preachers pay attention to deep African values of personal relationships, family, community, hospitality, sharing, patience, endurance in adversity, and service to others. The problem is the world does not hear enough about these preachers. Real church growth is taking place where these preachers are serving.

Q: *To what extent is the African church growing through the preaching of lay pastors?*

MP: In Kenya a majority of the new churches are led by pastors without formal training of any kind. Some of these preachers are effective and always seek to be faithful to Scripture. In most mainline churches the elders and deacons are responsible for teaching and preaching. I know this is true in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa where a single pastor has 8–10 churches under his or her care. The lay leaders try their best to preach biblically sound sermons. Some of the lay leaders listen to sermons by other people, especially Americans, and repeat them. Among the most plagiarized preachers is Rick Warren of Saddleback Church.

Q: *How might seminaries and teachers of preaching, in Africa and beyond, provide assistance to lay preachers?*

MP: By offering theological education by extension, having short seminars on preaching to pastors and lay leaders who are too busy to attend seminary or Bible school. Homiletics also needs to be a subject that occupies a central place in the teaching of seminaries and Bible schools.

Q: *Are there things we might keep in prayer, as the Word is proclaimed in Africa?*

MP: We need to pray that the church in Africa achieves theological maturity. Africans need to articulate a speech about God that speaks to her people and is faithful to Scripture.



Written Words on the Spoken Word: New Titles in Preaching

THE WRITTEN word has much to say about the spoken word these days. Nearly all of the following titles were released within the past three years.

There are two major new entries on the textbook scene: *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition*, by Calvin Miller, and *Graceful Speech: An Invitation to Preaching*, by Lucy Lind Hogan. These join new editions of two standard texts: Thomas G. Long's *The Witness of Preaching* and Bryan Chappell's *Christ-Centered Preaching*.

A fine new survey of preaching across the centuries is provided by O. C. Edwards in *A History of Preaching*. That history can be helpfully supplemented by readings in Richard Lischer's *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present*. Ronald Boyd-MacMillan's *Explosive Preaching: Letters on Detonating the Gospel in the 21st Century* offers pointed comments on contemporary preaching from someone refreshingly aware of its historical development.

The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching, edited by Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson, draws on more than 100 writers who cover the ecclesiastical, theological, and homiletical spectrums. With over 200 articles and a CD of audio excerpts, it's as unmissable as it is overwhelming.

Briefer are two books of collected interviews: *Preaching with Power: Dynamic Insights from Twenty Top Pastors*, edited by Michael Dudit, features T. D. Jakes, Lloyd Ogilvie, Brian McLaren, Rick Warren, and others. *Refining Your Style: Learning from Respected Communicators*, edited by Dave Stone, gives voice to preachers such as Max Lucado, Erwin McManus, Ken Davis, Kirbyjon Caldwell, Liz Curtis Higgs, and Rob Bell.

Some helpful essays from fine homileticians will be found in *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?* edited by Mike Graves, and in *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, edited by Scott M. Gibson.

Guidance in exploring the "brave new world" of multimedia comes from Quentin J. Schultze in *High-Tech*

Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely. See also Tex Sample's *Powerful Persuasion: Multimedia Witness in Christian Worship* and Shane Hipps' *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church*.

Theological perspectives on the preaching task are offered in Paul Scott Wilson's *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*—a brief and very readable survey. William H. Willimon is always winsome and wise—it's a delight to listen in on his *Conversations with Barth on Preaching*, and his *Proclamation and Theology* is brief and biblical. Stephen H. Webb's *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* is a rare aural complement to the extensive work being done on the visual component of communication.

Preaching in the emerging/postmodern/"no-labels-please-but-we're-really-different" church is discussed more often in blogs than in books. One title is *A Is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* by Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer. Another is *Preaching Re-Imagined* by Doug Pagitt. Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis* is a fascinating read, just as his NOOMA DVDs are a fascinating experience.

All preachers will be informed by Cleophus J. Larue's *Power in the Pulpit: How America's Most Effective Black Preachers Prepare Their Sermons*, and by Eunjoo Mary Kim in *Women Preaching: Theology and Practice through the Ages*. Fuller faculty books also make significant contributions: Nancey C. Murphey's *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion* has a chapter on "Reasoning in Sermons." *Communicating God's Word in a Complex World: God's Truth or Hocus Pocus?* by R. Daniel Shaw and Charles E. Van Engen brings missiological insights to the communicator's task, as had earlier works by Charles H. Kraft.

Clayton J. Schmit's *Public Reading of Scripture* and his *Too Deep for Words: A Theology of Liturgical Expression* are welcome in the local church as well as in academia. The

following books were cited in Schmit's article in this issue: Saint Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, Karl Barth's *Homiletics*, and Richard Lischer's *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*. Schmit also recommends the *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, edited by William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer.

Gorsuch, continued from page 15

God has created people with other personalities than our own, so no personality is ultimately better than another.

We can learn more about ministry by learning more about our personalities, but this basic principle usually applies: We find it difficult to understand and be sensitive to people who are different. And *they* may be put off by those differences. Identifying some of those characteristics enables us to build sermons that reach people who are unlike us as well as those who are like us. This is where the pastor needs to be sensitive and open to learning about the world in which others exist. If the extrovert minister can have a confidante who is an introvert, and vice versa, the pastor can preach sermons that reach more of the congregation.

Each one present at Pentecost heard preaching in their

Pannell, continued from page 21

the community and the larger white-dominated society. The preacher was the spokesperson between two worlds, and in the process became the authority in both. The preacher was Moses before Pharaoh, Deborah sitting in the seat of judgment and singing the song of victory over the enemies of God, and the host of leaders who spoke the word of Jehovah in times of great distress. Such leaders not only spoke for God, but God spoke through them. Black people identify with God-ordained leaders to a degree not nearly so true elsewhere in the church community. Tom Skinner and I listened to preachers discuss potential support of our efforts in Chicago years ago. The white preachers looked at each other, smiled, and pledged their support on the spot. That was not a mere matter of polity.

Then there is the matter of culture. When it comes to church, Black people expect the sermon to relate to their lives and the issues that concern them. Historically, this has derived from the unique composition of African village life and the values that undergirded it. It was more than a Sunday-go-to-meetin' exercise. It became, along with the family, the most important institution in the community. It

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own languages. We must build sermons that people hear in *their* own languages—the languages of their personalities. ■

ENDNOTES

1. This is defined by scale H of the 16 PF. See R. B. Cattell, *The Scientific Analysis of Personality* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1965); M. T. Russell and D. L. Karol, *The 16PF Fifth Edition Administrator's Manual* (Champaign, IL: IPAT, 1994).
2. Tat Cheung, "Go—Gettysburg Index: Evaluating Comprehensibility of Consent Forms" masters thesis (Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2006).
3. Introversion/extroversion is a personality characteristic in the "Big 5" and "Five Factor" models. P. T. Costa Jr. and R. R. McCrae, *Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R) and NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO FFI) Professional Manual* (Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, 1992); Russell and Karol, *16PF Fifth Edition Administrator's Manual*. For a summary of early work, see Table 1 in B. Mersthan and R. L. Gorsuch, "Number of Factors in the Personality Sphere: Does Increase in the Number of Factors Increase Predictability of Real-Life Criteria?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 33 (1988): 675–80.

was church, but also town hall; it was church, but also "Carnegie Hall" where all manner of gifts and callings were nurtured. Echoes of the corporate life of the community could be seen and heard on any given Sunday. The song has changed, but the melody lingers on and the church is still highly regarded as the central institution among the masses.

This is why every local politician in the city will turn up at black churches during an election. They know it is within the tradition of the Black church that God reaches out to the larger society to effect change. The preacher is expected to be supportive of this tradition and to speak for God and the people in matters of justice and social order. It was no surprise that this culture and tradition, these values, would produce a preacher named Martin Luther King Jr. It is tempting to suggest that the church in white America produces evangelists while the church in Black America produces prophets. The temptation must be resisted, but it remains true that preaching in the black church is called to sustain a heavier burden for the well-being of its community than its white counterpart. And when it is right, the saints dance, and the kingdom goes forth with power to make things new. ■

Douglas Nason is assistant professor of communication for Fuller's School of Theology, helping future church leaders understand the theological basis for Christian communication and equipping them to share the gospel in the most effective ways. His areas of expertise include communication, preaching, and speech communication. Nason has extensive ministry and teaching experience including missions work in India and service as a visiting lecturer at Princeton Seminary. He has done pastoral work across the U.S. and in England, including at London's famed City Temple, and has several publications including the pamphlet *Speaking for God in India*, which has been translated into Hindi.

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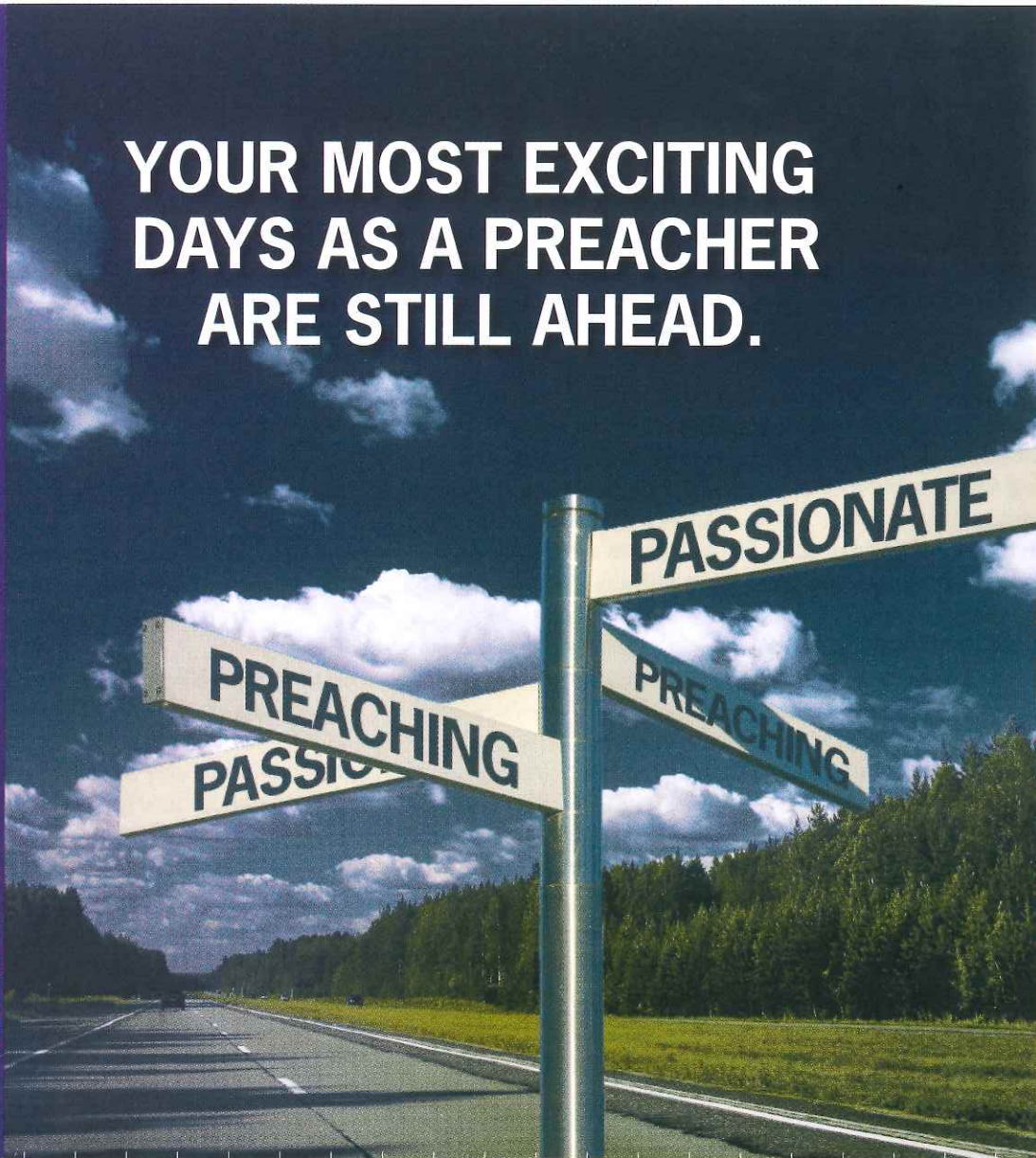
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