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Preaching with all our souls: introducing the SIFT method

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Introduction

Preachers know all too well that preaching is not a simple task. As preachers we carry an important responsibility for proclamation, but also for interpretation. As preachers we engage seriously with reading the scriptures, but also with interpreting the scriptures. As preachers we engage seriously with reading the movement of the Holy Spirit in God's world, but also with interpreting the Spirit. As preachers we engage seriously with reading the contemporary context in which we live, but also with interpreting that context.

As preachers we are involved in the complex task of interpretation, whether we are aware of it or not; and generally it is better to be aware of what we are doing rather than to take too much for granted and to leave too many of our assumptions untested. The study of hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. Increasingly people concerned with studying scripture are taking hermeneutics seriously. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore one relatively new theory of hermeneutics that is relevant both for studying scripture and for thinking about preaching. The theory is known as the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching.

Hermeneutics

Scholars concerned with the interpretation of scripture have become increasingly interested in the role of the reader and what it is that the reader brings to the text. Insights from sociology have helped us to recognise that different groups of people bring different perspectives and different questions to the text of scripture. Sociology has helped us to appreciate the importance of *context* in reading scripture.

From this starting point attention has been given to a range of contextual perspectives in

reading scripture. It now seems to make very good sense to speak of *liberation* perspectives reading the text through the eyes of the oppressed. It now seems very good sense to speak of *feminist* perspectives reading the text through the eyes of women.

It now seems to make equally good sense to speak of black theology, urban theology, or rural theology. The context clearly helps to shape how we read and what it is that God is speaking into our situation. Contextual theology is, at best, prophetic theology, hearing clear the voice of God and interpreting and applying the voice of God incarnationally.

Psychological perspectives

While sociologists now hold an increasingly established and accepted place in discussions about the interpretation, application and proclamation of scripture, psychologists have arrived more recently on the scene. The SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching has its roots in psychological theory.

In one sense, the SIFT method is offered as an intelligent response to the dominical command to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your mind’. Now surely psychologists should be able to help interpret and illuminate that command. After all, part of the psychologists’ job is to study the human mind.

In another sense, the SIFT method is offered as a profound reflection of the doctrine of creation grounded in Genesis 1:27. Taking seriously Genesis 1:27 commits us to a theology in which human difference is taken very seriously. According to Genesis 1:27

God created humankind in the image of God,
in the image of God, God created them,

male and female God created them.

To accept that both male and female are created in the image of God commits us to celebrating and to valuing diversity. According to this view of creation the difference between men and women may be seen as just one example of human diversity that reflects the divine image. Alongside sex differences, we will want to place ethnic differences. Created in the same divine image we will wish to value women and men equally. Created in the same divine image we will wish to value black and white equally.

The SIFT method goes one step beyond sex differences and ethnic differences to argue that certain key psychological differences also reflect the divine image.

Psychological types

The psychological differences that are of key importance in the SIFT method are derived from the model of psychological type developed by Carl Jung and helpfully made known in many Christian circles by instruments like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Kiersey Temperament Sorter and the Francis Psychological Scales.

At the heart of Jung's theory is the idea that the human mind has access to two perceiving functions (called sensing and intuition) and to two judging functions (called thinking and feeling).

Every normal human being has access to all four functions, but each individual also has an innate tendency to prefer one perceiving function over the other and to prefer one judging function over the other. The idea is similar to that of noting that we have two hands, but recognising that most people prefer one to the other, leading to the clear differences between

left-handedness and right-handedness.

From this starting point psychologists working in Jung's tradition noted that some people developed sensing as their strongest function, some developed intuition, some developed thinking and some developed feeling. Each of these four functions has its own highly distinctive voice and its own characteristic perspective on interpretation.

The SIFT method

The SIFT method takes the Jungian psychologists' observation one step further and notes how the preacher's dominant (strongest) function tends to be reflected in her or his preferred approach to reading the text of scripture, to reading the movement of the Holy Spirit in God's world, and to reading the contemporary context. In other words, the process of hermeneutics seems to be related to who we are. Now in some ways this should not be a surprising revelation, and yet in other ways it takes some of us some time to recognise the full implications of such a revelation.

Beginning from the observation that each of the four psychological functions brings a distinctive perspective (or distinct voice) to the preacher's role as interpreting, the SIFT method argues that the rounded reading and the rounded proclamation of scripture needs to engage all four functions and to allow all four voices to be heard. Clearly, one way to implement this insight is to engage a team of preachers specially selected to bring all four perspectives, all four voices into the pulpit.

Given that this team approach to preaching may not be that easy to implement (many pulpits are just too small to accommodate four preachers at the same time!), the SIFT method

proposes a somewhat more practical strategy that is accessible to us all with some training, with some commitment, and with some discipline. The SIFT method invites us to approach each invitation to preach by addressing all four functions in turn and to do so in the fixed order of sensing (S), intuition (I), feeling (F) and thinking (T). Logically the perceiving functions (sensing and intuition) precede the judging functions (feeling and thinking).

Sensing and Intuition

The sensing function comes into play first because the sensing function is concerned with the facts and with the details. The sensing function looks very carefully at what the text says and how the text says what it has to say. The sensing voice properly begins by drawing attention to all the details in the passage and may wish to encourage the listeners to enter into the passage with all their senses. They may be invited to picture the scene, to hear the voices, to taste the atmosphere, to sniff the air and to touch the buildings. The sensing preacher who is familiar with the problems of studying texts may wish to highlight the textual problems, to make comparisons with other passages of scripture or to analyse the meaning of individual words and phrases.

Such a sensing approach is not, however, an end in itself. Sensing prepares the way for intuition to come into play. The intuitive function spots the major themes, grasps the big picture, forms a grand overview, and draws imaginative links between the text and the experiences of the people of God in today's world and in the local context. The intuitive voice wishes the listener to engage in this playful attitude toward the text and to spark links and ideas in the individual listener's own mind. For the intuitive function there is no one correct answer, but there are many open windows into the creative mind of God.

As perceiving functions, sensing and intuition are not concerned to make evaluations or to force closure. They are concerned to see what is there (sensing) and what could be there (intuition).

Feeling and thinking

The third function to come into play is the feeling function. The feeling function is concerned with interpersonal matters, with human relationships, with peace in God's world and harmony among God's people. The feeling function is attracted to the God of mercy and is eager to hear how God heals the wounded and soothes the hurt. The feeling voice opens the mind of the listener to make judgements and to form evaluations in light of the God of mercy who shines through the scripture. The feeling voice is attuned to the social gospel as seen through response to individual people. The feeling function shapes the pastoral heart.

The fourth function to come into play is the thinking function. The thinking function is concerned with establishing truth, with fairness and justice in God's world and with the vindication of just causes. The thinking function is attracted to the God of justice and is eager to hear how God reforms corrupt institutions and brings down the hearts of the proud. The thinking voice opens the mind of the listener to make judgements and form evaluations in the light of the God of justice who shines through the scriptures. The thinking voice is attracted to the social gospel as seen through the transformation of institutions and the creation of a fair and just world. The thinking function shapes the theological mind.

Conclusion

Taken together the four psychological functions, as displayed in the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching, enable a fully rounded approach to interpreting the text

and to preaching the word of God in the contemporary and in the local situation.

Note

Leslie J Francis is Canon Theologian at Bangor Cathedral and Professor of Religions and Education at the University of Warwick. Further insight into the SIFT approach have been recently published in Leslie J Francis and Andrew Village, *Preaching with all our Soul: hermeneutics and psychological type*, London, Continuum, 2008.