

Homiletics

Homiletics, like many other Christian disciplines, is hard to define adequately, but in essence, it is the study and practice of the preaching of the Word of God. There is a strong biblical basis for preaching, both in precedent and in injunction, and it has been a central feature of the church throughout all ages. The history of homiletics reveals a general shift of focus from the text, to the preacher, and then to the audience. Concerning the text, although there are several different terminologies, the main divide in approach is between expository and topical sermon form. The focus on the preacher, rather than the text, highlights the key issue of the source of authority for preaching. Concerning the audience, it is obvious that preaching is always in the context of a group of listeners and so their needs must be an area of concern. However, needs and cultures should never override the primary preaching responsibility of fidelity to the Word of God. While preaching cannot be divorced from its audience, neither should it be separated from the contexts of sound hermeneutics and of church worship and ministry.

Introduction

The word 'homiletics' commonly denotes the subset of Practical Theology dealing with the formation and presentation of sermons. Typically, the scope of the subject includes such things as the source and presentation of the sermon, the preacher, and the audience. In this article, I will cover these aspects in addition to the biblical basis of preaching, historical development, and the interface between homiletics and hermeneutics. However, I will start the discussion with a brief exposure of the more common definitions of homiletics.

Definitions

The most common definition of homiletics is 'the art of preaching' but some expand this to 'the art of preparing and delivering sermons'. This of course both limits the

subject to an 'art' and severely prescribes its scope. Campbell Morgan takes a far more dynamic approach and defines preaching as 'the declaration of the grace of God to human need on the authority of the Throne of God' (1974:12). Sangster quotes Bernard Manning's definition of preaching as 'a manifestation of the Incarnate Word, from the Written Word, by the spoken word' (1956:4). The essential foci here are declaration, grace, need, and divine authority. Haddon Robinson develops a more comprehensive definition of (expository) preaching as 'the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers' (1980:20). Instead of declaration, he uses the less dynamic 'communication,' but he adds the elements of hermeneutics, the Holy Spirit, and the preacher. Before stating his definition, he wisely observes that 'preaching is a living process involving God, the preacher, and the congregation, and no definition can pretend to capture that dynamic' (1980:19).

A definition that incorporates all the main element of homiletics would be too long and clumsy to be of any real practical value, so a short, succinct definition covering only the essentials would probably serve better. My own formulation is that preaching is 'the authoritative pronouncement of the Word of God with power'.

Perhaps, rather than focusing on definitions, a better approach would be to examine the biblical basis for preaching.

The biblical basis

In Romans 10:14 Paul concludes the logical Gospel chain of asking, preceded by believing, preceded by hearing, with the words, 'and how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?' The Gospel is the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus. It is the pronouncement of the Word of God. The injunction to all who are called to preach, who are 'sent', is to 'Preach the Word' (2 Tim 4:2).

The preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ was characterised by power and authority. Luke observes that the people 'were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority' (Lk 4:32). Jesus articulated the extent of His authority when he declared, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mtt 28:18). He then instructed His disciples to 'go'. Therefore to pronounce the Word of God, who is Jesus Christ, is to speak with His delegated authority.

Jesus had both authority and power, and Paul identified the necessity for Holy Spirit power in preaching when he stated that his message and preaching 'were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power...' (1 Cor 2:4).

It is from these scriptural components that I formulated my core understanding of preaching as 'the authoritative pronouncement of the Word of God with power'.

Before considering the three key sub-heading within the subject of homiletics, it would be profitable to survey its historic development in the post-apostolic church.

Historic development

Over the centuries, the study and practice of homiletics has tended to focus on three component parts – the preaching portion (text), the preacher, and the people. Different generations have focused on one or more of these elements.

In the early church, the focus was on the text, and preaching consisted mainly of a simple discussion of a scriptural portion. This approach had its origin in the rabbinical sermons to which the first church leaders were accustomed. The word homiletics comes from the Greek *homiletikos*, which is most usually translated as 'conversation'. This implies a degree of discussion rather than a one-directional oration.

John Chrysostom (the golden mouth) ministered in Antioch until his death in AD 407 and is generally credited with 'elevating the *homilia* to a higher level of rhetorical sophistication' (Kneidel: 2010). I am not at all sure that this development was indeed

an improvement, but it certainly marked a transition in preaching from discussion to rhetoric. Twenty-seven years after the death of John of Antioch (Chrysostom), Augustine defended the use of classical rhetoric in the final book of his *De doctrina christiana* where he wrote that a preacher's three duties were to teach, delight, and move. Clearly, the focus had moved from the preaching portion, the text, to the abilities of the preacher himself.

In medieval times, preachers structured their sermons into sub-themes that they elaborated upon with citations and examples. During this period, the focus was on the preacher's composition skills. This general trend continued into the reformation period, and beyond, although men like Martin Luther (1483-1546) placed great emphasis on the biblical text. Later, in the early 17th century the puritan William Perkins advocated a sermon form that consisted of the explanation of a biblical text, followed by a number of doctrinal points, each of which the preacher applied to current life situations. Prominent preachers in that age were Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), John Wesley (1703-1791), and George Whitefield (1714-1770).

In earlier years, the focus was largely on the skills of the preacher, but in the 19th century, the focus shifted to his character. Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) captured the sentiment of those times when he defined preaching as 'truth through personality'. Prominent preachers of that period included Charles Finney (1792-1875), Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899), G Campbell Morgan (1863-1945), and Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981).

In the early 20th century, Karl Barth denounced the rhetorical emphasis and declared that homiletics belongs rather within the field of biblical studies and church dogmatics. The focus shifted back from the preacher to the text. However, the emphasis soon moved from the text to the audience, the people. The stress was on the response to the Word preached, and this yielded the study and practice of techniques that illicit emotional and cerebral responses. Modern evangelists have incorporated the theories of mass communication and audience response into their preaching formulations and styles.

In our generation, the main issues within the field of homiletics still cluster within the domains of the text, the preacher, and the people.

The text

One of the single biggest points of divergence in the study and practice of preaching today is the source of the sermon. In Evangelical circles, most preachers acknowledge the importance of the biblical text. The discussion pivots around the place and role of the text in preaching.

The terms used to describe a text-honouring approach to preaching vary and include words like biblical, expository, and textual. Haddon Robinson called his book 'Biblical Preaching' and sub-titled it 'The development and delivery of expository messages'. In essence, he equates biblical preaching with expository preaching. Paul Borden, describes expository preaching firstly as that which 'contains a clear statement of the primary biblical idea that is legitimately derived from a passage or passages' (1992:63), and by passages he means biblical texts. His second distinction is that the structure of an expository sermon must be consistent with the structure of the text or texts (1992:64). His third qualification has little to do with the exposition of the text; he claims that an expository sermon must be relevant to the listeners. His fourth contention is that 'the idea, outline, applications, illustrations, and assertions must fit with each other as well as with the context and intent of the biblical text' (1992:64). In this description of expository preaching are elements of focus on the preacher's skill, and on relevance to the audience, yet the main idea is faithfulness to the biblical text. In his essay titled 'Textual preaching', Al Fasol quotes C.S.Roddy's statement that 'a textual sermon is one in which both the topic and divisions of development are derived from and follow the order of the text...' (1992:77). It seems that the essence of expository preaching is fidelity to the content, intent, and context of a biblical textual portion, whereas textual preaching additionally requires that the order of the sermon points follows the exact order of the points the text makes. I do not think that this is a particularly helpful distinction, as the order of points sometimes needs to be rearranged to make the text more intelligible to the modern listener. I think that Robinson was most perceptive in his observation that 'expository preaching at its core is more a philosophy than a method' (1980:20). For me, the real issue is that, irrespective of whether we call the sermon biblical, expository, or textual, the

scriptural text should prescribe the sermon and not be used simply to validate the preachers own ideas.

The preacher

Whilst seminaries give attention to the spiritual maturity and holy life-style of the preacher, this does not appear to be a practical focus in much of today's church and itinerant preaching scene. Paul said; 'follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor 11:1) but the implied injunction of many modern preachers seems to be "Follow what I say, not what I do". The focus, in much of the modern church, has shifted from the authority of the scripture to the authority of the preacher. Evidence of this is the prime place given to the topical sermon form. In expository preaching the authority is derived from the text, whilst in topical preaching the authority is implied in the many points the preacher makes which he or she then attempts to validate by citing a text or two (proof-texting).

The way I have defined topical preaching is as I have observed it practiced in much of the evangelical church of our day – topics seeking texts. However, as usual, terminology can trip us up. For instance, Francis Rossouw describes the difference between textual and topical preaching as follows: 'In the textual sermon, the text determines the choice of the topic; but in the topical sermon, the topic determines the choice of text' (1992:85). I have no problem with this. In my experience, most expository sermons start as a topic. What I mean by this is that most often the preacher will feel a burden for a particular issue. Or, she may believe she has received divine guidance to address a specific topic. Or, the Christian calendar determines a special topic (e.g. Christmas or Easter). For me the point of departure comes in what happens after that. The one approach is for the preacher to develop a number of points that he feels properly explores the topic (for which he then earnestly seeks supportive texts) – this is what I understand as a Topical sermon development. Alternately, the preacher seeks for a definitive text (or in some cases two or three texts) dealing with the topic. Once found, the preacher then stays within the text and allows it to prescribe both the intent and points of the sermon – this is

what I understand as Expository or Textual sermon development. However, as Robinson observes, it is at its core more a philosophy than a method. The central issue, as I see it, is this: In expository preaching, the text prescribes the intent, content, and authority, whilst in topical preaching (as I define it) the preacher prescribes the intent and content, and the authority resides more in him or her than it does in the text.

Whilst topical preaching is a major issue in the current study and practice of homiletics, another 'preacher oriented' topic is the legitimacy of female preachers. The Pentecostal movement was characterised by several dynamics and doctrines but also notable in its approach to women preachers. For example, Maria Woodworth-Etter (1844-1924), Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944), and Kathryn Kuhlman (1907-1976) were all influential Pentecostal preachers. Today, some other denominational groups allow women to preach, while others vehemently deny their right to preach to anyone other than other women or children. For Evangelicals, the issue is settled by an understanding of scriptures that have a bearing on the matter. Paul prohibited women from speaking in church (1 Cor 15:35) but one has to decide what he meant by 'speaking' because he clearly does not regard a woman praying in the congregation as a problem provided she evidences submission to appropriate authority (1 Cor 11:13). Luke observes that Phillip had four unmarried daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9), so I have to assume that the prohibition on women 'speaking' in church does not apply to either praying or prophesying.

The issue is too complex to resolve in a brief article of this nature, so all I can do here is to give you my 'bottom line' understanding. For me, the determining factor is the locus of authority. If the authority lies in the text, and a woman faithfully expounds the legitimate meaning of the text, then I cannot see why she cannot preach it under the authority of the Eldership of her church. I define prophecy essentially as speaking on behalf of God, and so I regard preaching as a form of prophecy. If women can prophecy then they can preach. Establishing doctrine (which I understand as the essence of the teaching ministry) is, in my view, the prerogative of the teaching/lead Elder of a church and as such is exclusively male. (I do not believe that women can be Elders, let alone Lead Elders).

These then are two of the main issues under the heading of ‘the preacher’ – topical sermons and female preachers.

Now, let us consider the third leg of the homiletic triad, the people.

The audience

Preaching, if it is to meet its objective of changing people’s lives, must be an effective form of communication. To be effective it must be both well presented and relevant to the listeners. A common complaint one hears from congregation members is ‘the preacher is for ever answering questions no one is asking!’ This is a fair and relevant complaint. Audience need is a legitimate concern. However, it becomes a problem if we determine audience need as a prime determinant of sermon content. Whether we select a text from a lectionary, because of a conviction, or as a prescription to meet a perceived audience need is not the issue. However, it is problematic when a preacher allows audience needs or cultural expectations to determine, or heavily influence, his interpretation of the text. The relatively new idea of reader response criticism opens the door to this sort of approach to preaching. The understanding here is that a text gains meaning by the purposeful act of someone reading, or hearing, and interpreting it. Of course, none of us is free from the preconceptions we bring to the task of interpreting scripture, and listeners will always understand a sermon from their own perspectives and life situations, but the crucial thing is the commitment to understanding and presenting what we believe the text is divinely intended to mean.

A relevant question to ask is ‘should the role of the audience influence our definition of preaching?’ If we go back to the meaning of the word ‘homiletics’, perhaps an answer might suggest itself. The word means ‘conversation’ and conversation implies two-way communication. The rhetorical element introduced early on in church history has strongly influenced our modern understanding of preaching. However, if we go back to the preaching of the Lord Jesus, we find both proclamation and discussion. When He preached to large groups, of essentially non-disciples, He proclaimed. When He preached to, and taught, His smaller group of

disciples, He conversed. When Peter preached his first sermon on the day of Pentecost he boldly proclaimed the Gospel, but then he responded to the question asked by people in the audience (Acts 2:37). Evangelistic preaching probably demands a larger proportion of rhetoric than discussion, but in today's culture, this may be debateable. However, we conduct most preaching in church congregations where the audience consists mostly of followers of the Lord Jesus. Perhaps we should give more of a place to discussion and interaction. Certainly, this is a contention of the post-modern generation.

Interface of homiletics with other elements of practical theology

The first indispensable interface is with the discipline of hermeneutics. Preaching that is not based on a responsible interpretation of scripture is certainly neither expository, nor textual, nor biblical, and it is debatable if it even qualifies at all as Christian preaching. Homiletics must not be divorced in any way from hermeneutics. A student and practitioner of hermeneutics may never preach, but a preacher should never be other than a student of hermeneutics.

A second interface is with church worship and spiritual ministry. As already observed, we conduct most preaching within the context of church worship services. Since the reformation, it has been a common practice to position the sermon as the high point in the church service. In a sense, the songs and prayers serve as a build-up to the preaching event. I have two problems with this. Firstly, while preaching is important, it is not the main reason we come together as congregations. Our primary motivation is to meet corporately with God. The elements of this divine/human encounter are songs of praise and worship, prayers, testimonies, ministry one to another and... the preached Word. Secondly, I hold that anointed expository preaching motivates worship, prayer and ministry, which then become a response to The Word rather than a prelude to it.

Conclusion

From the very first days of the church, preaching has played a central role. Homiletics, as a discipline, attempts to study and apply this important spiritual activity. The focus within homiletics over the ages has shifted from the text, to the preacher, and then to the audience. Clearly, preaching is never conducted in a vacuum and so we cannot effectively preach in isolation from our personal condition or the needs of our audience. However, the central issue in homiletics must be the proclamation of the Word of God, and so faithful exposition of the living Word from the written Word should always be its central focus.

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