Developing a Transformative Theology for Preaching

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to put forward a new paradigm for understanding the preaching event and what the overall purpose of preaching should be in a post-Christian context. It will first examine traditional sermon structures that facilitate preaching as a "performed event." This then segues into discussing the author's understanding of the functions of preaching (Instruction/Reflection/Application/Transformation), offering summaries of sample sermons for each function. The article concludes with an argument for why a new definition of preaching is needed, seeing preaching as a momentary encounter that leads to spiritual transformation over time.

The church cannot exist without preaching. This is the unconscious reason why professionals and parishioners alike are often critical of the craft. God can exist and does exist without good preaching and in spite of bad preaching. However the church cannot (cf. Rom. 10:14–17). In short, the church cannot be the church without preaching. And preaching cannot be preaching without God.

1. Preaching as Performed Event

In order to clearly articulate the proposed theological schema that this essay envisions, we must first begin by clearly defining terms. In the colloquial language of today's ecclesiastical structure, little difference is seen between "preaching" and "sermon." In many cases, they have become interchangeable terms, descriptors of the same action or same function. However, at a simple linguistic level, these two terms are quite different. "Preach" is a verb ("to preach"), an action that is carried out by one trained to perform that action ("preacher"). A "sermon" is a noun, an object – the "thing" of the grammatical trinity of person, place or thing – that can be manipulated for a purpose. While a preacher (also a noun) preaches, can preach, has preached, or is preaching, he or she uses a sermon (message, lesson, homily or talk) to accomplish this task. However, the term

"sermon" does not share an equal cognate.[1] While one can "sermonize," this term is pejorative, and is therefore inadequate for our discussion except to serve as a warning against inappropriate or ineffective implementation of the use of the sermon in preaching. While the sermon is the object used to implement preaching, it is *not* the goal of preaching. Spiritual transformation is the goal of preaching (Ps 1; Rom 12:1–3; 2Tim 3:10–17; Heb 4:1–13). Instruction in doctrine, as vital as this is in a theologically illiterate culture, falls short of the mark unless those listening are challenged to do something with what they have heard.[2]

However, if we believe that simple behavioral change is the goal of preaching, then we replace the sermon with the therapy session. While a sermon provides us with the momentary encounter with God, transformation does not occur through a momentary encounter. Genuine spiritual transformation occurs through the consistent practice of preaching. As Sangster wrote, "Preaching is a constant agent of the divine power by which the greatest miracle God ever works is wrought and wrought again. God uses it *to change lives*."[3] Implicit in Sangster's comments is the continual process through which one must go in order to be spiritually transformed. Here, therapeutic language can serve of some value.[4] Recovery does not occur in a single session. It can take years for a recovering addict to actually experience a sense of healing, although any recovering addict will affirm that they are never completely free of his or her disease/addiction. The same is true for the spiritual seeker. It is through the consistent hearing of preaching, the consistent participation in the sacraments, and the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines that we discover spiritual healing (transformation). Richard Lischer notes that God "forms a community of faith over time" through the act of "*preaching*, as opposed to individual sermons."[5] Therefore, transformation is an on-going process.

However, even using the terms "transformative" or "transformational" to describe the goal of preaching is problematic. On one hand, as has already been mentioned, is the misunderstanding that the preaching event serves as a group therapy session. In this vein, preaching focuses on fixing marital problems and breaking gambling addictions. As David Buttrick warned, therapeutic preaching has a tendency to "limit theological meaning" as we focus on the purely physical

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[1] While a delightful author, *Calvin Miller* was not completely successful in coining a new homiletic term. In his fable The Sermon-Maker, Miller only uses this term in a triumphant fashion at the end of the story. Instead of developing the "sermon-maker" as an identity to aspire to, he employs a more traditional vocabulary; see The Sermon-Maker. Tales of a Transformed Preacher, Grand Rapids 2003.

[2] *Bill Easum*, Preaching for Transformation, www.religiousproductnews.com/articles/ 2010-September/In-Every-Issue/Preaching-for-Transformation.htm; accessed 27 November 2013.

[3] *W. E. Sangster*, The Craft of the Sermon, London 1954, 16.

[4] For helpful treatments of this difficult approach to preaching, see *Thomas G. Long*, Therapeutic Preaching: Three Views, in: Princeton Seminary Bulletin 68, no. 3 (1976), 80–93; and *Neil Pembroke*, Theocentric Therapeutic Preaching. A Sample Sermon with Commentary, in: Practical Theology 5, December 2012, 237–258.

[5] *Richard Lischer*, A Theology of Preaching. The Dynamics of the Gospel, rev. ed., Eugene (OR) 2001, 85.

problems that we face rather than seeing them as components of God's redemptive scheme.[6] As helpful as this sort of preaching can be, it is, at its core, anthropocentric. On the other hand is the misunderstanding that the preaching event serves as a rally call to social activism. In this vein, preaching focuses on establishing church-based soup kitchens and erasing exclusivist labels through the development of a public theology. However, as Victor Anderson warns, public theology has a tendency to remain as only "public discourse" and fails to bring about any legitimate social change.[7] This sort of preaching can also be helpful, yet it also falls into the anthropocentric trap. In either case, continued exposure to either type of preaching fails to bring about transformation (cf. 1Cor 3:1–3; Heb 5:11–14). What is needed, then, is a theological structure that is rooted in the metanarrative of Scripture rather than in pet passages or imposed systems of eisegesis.

2. Theological Structures for Preaching

Preaching is a communication *process*. This means that both the individual sermon and the continual action of preaching have starting points and stopping points. This also means that communication can be affected by factors such as content, structure, mechanics and culture. Of these, the factor that most distinguishes static communication from dynamic communication is structure. Two points of clarification are in order: First, in regards to content, this essay holds firm to the doctrine that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" and that "it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). Therefore, a fundamental belief of this essay is that something will happen to someone every time scripture is proclaimed. Second, how that change impacts the hearer will be effected by how the message is delivered. It is possible that the hearers are simply not ready or are unable to hear the word (cf. Mark 4:15). Still, the preacher has been called to speak the word to those who give ear. Therefore, the preacher must take care to preach in such a way as to provide the best hearing possible for the message.

Traditionally, according to Wilson, preachers saw theology and structure as separate issues.[8] Sermons were commonly designed in a mechanical fashion according to whether the sermon was topical or textual. The purpose of preaching was either to explain the meaning of a text or to define the limits of a doctrine; knowledge was often substituted for relationship. Many preachers,

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[6] *David Buttrick*, A Fearful Pulpit, a Wayward Land, in: Mike Graves (ed.), What's the Matter with Preaching Today?, Louisville 2004, 41.

[7] *Victor Anderson*, The Search for Public Theology in the United States, in: Thomas G. Long/Edward Farley (eds.), Preaching as Theological Task: Word, Gospel, Scripture. In Honor of David Buttrick, Louisville 1996, 19f.

[8] *Paul Scott Wilson*, Preaching and Homiletical Theory, Preaching and Its Partners Series, St. Louis 2004), 73f.; see a more fleshed-out argument in *Robert Stephen Reid*, The Four Voices of Preaching. Connecting Purpose and Identity behind the Pulpit, Grand Rapids (MI) 2006, 38–52.

however, found this disconnected approach to preaching lacking as they wrestle with how to structure sermons in order to bring about the transformation that Paul extolled in Rom 12.

The structure that many have turned to over the centuries in an effort to bridge the chasm between the ancient text and the modern world is the Law/Gospel paradigm, which is commonly (if not incorrectly) associated with Martin Luther.[9] Although Milton Crum attempted to reconfigure this structure as Complication-Resolution,[10] the damage had already been done. In this theological structure, the point of preaching was to move people away from the law towards the cross, forgetting the words of Paul that we would not know grace *without* the law (Rom 7:7–8:17).

A second theological structure that has become popular in the last couple of decades is that of Trouble and Grace. In an attempt to revise the Law/Gospel paradigm, Paul Scott Wilson coined this particular wording. Realizing Luther's misinterpretation, Wilson argues that trouble (law) leads to grace (gospel) and that grace (gospel) has no strength without trouble (law).[11] In Wilson's structure, these two elements are theological poles that humanity finds itself tethered between. Trouble has been a present companion since Eden, just as grace has been with us since God offered the first redemptive sacrifice following the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21). What keeps the tension from overwhelming humanity is hope, the acceptance that God will someday overcome the powers of evil and restore those who have clung to God's merciful hand during times of trial. The problem with this structure is that it can be misunderstood as a type of triumphant theology, a sort of liberation theology that promises that all things will work out for *our* good rather than realizing that "in all things God works for good" (Rom 8:28).[12]

A third structure, while not necessarily developed for homiletics, is Walter Brueggemann's cycle of Orientation, Disorientation and New Orientation in the Psalms.[13] This theological structure is the most promising for this discussion, given its focus on faith as a progressional movement. In the orientation stage, things are going well for the person of faith. The economy is good, the kids are behaving, health is stable, and there is food in the pantry. However, in the disorientation stage, something in the equation malfunctions and things fall out of sync. The economy takes a downturn, the kids become juvenile delinquents, an unsettling diagnosis is made, and the pantry is bare. The person of faith, the person who once felt quite secure in her faith in God, now finds herself bowed low before the altar begging for release and restoration. This prayer is not a spiritual "hail Mary" but a prayer voiced from one who has a deep, intimate relationship

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[9] Ibid., 75.

[10] *Milton J. Crum*, Manual on Preaching. A New Process of Sermon Development, Valley Forge 1977, 71–86.

[11] *Paul Scott Wilson*, The Practice of Preaching, rev. ed., Nashville 2007, 64f.

[12] See the critiques of Wilson's paradigm in *O. Wesley Allen*, Determining the Form. Elements of Preaching series, Minneapolis 2008, 51; *Eugene L. Lowry*, The Sermon. Dancing on the Edge of Mystery, Nashville 1997, 78; and especially *Thomas G. Long*, The Witness of Preaching, Louisville ²2005, 128–131.

[13] *Walter Brueggemann*, The Message of the Psalms. A Theological Commentary, Minneapolis 1984, 19–21.

with God. She knows she can bare her soul before her Creator. As a result, in the new orientation stage restoration comes. The economy stabilizes, the kids find intervention, health somewhat recovers, and the pantry is filled with bargain brands. Is the situation perfect? Certainly not. However, faith, as Brueggemann understands it, does not require perfection (cf. Hab 3:17–19; Phil 4:10–14);[14] faith requires recovery and stability. The prayers in the Psalter were not prayed during times of a bull market. They were prayed in lean years; yet they were prayed with the faith that things would improve. Initially, this appears to be a suitable theological structure for transformative preaching. The problem, however, is that new orientation is not sustainable. There is always the possibility of returning to a previous theological orientation, one that bellows along with the poet who proudly stated that "I shall never be moved" (Ps 30:6). Additionally, this structure has primarily been employed as a method for understanding the theological message of Psalms and not as a way of conceptualizing a homiletic structure.[15]

3. Theological Functions of Preaching

Each person who stands to deliver a sermon to a congregation does so with some type of purpose. This purpose serves as the sieve for the sermon development process, guiding the preacher through the various stages of crafting the eventual sermon. Often this purpose reflects the preacher's practical theology, that lens that he or she uses to read and interpret Scripture in order to discern how to live as a Christian. For example, Tom Long has argued that there are four primary theological functions of preaching – herald, pastor, storyteller and witness.[16] For Long, however, the functions of herald, pastor and storyteller are insufficient functions of preaching. Therefore, the witness is the preferred biblical function of preaching, in that the preacher attempts to proclaim the full message of the Gospel without any of the sermonic "stumbling blocks" that Tillich warned us about (i.e., the preacher's own communication style or the use of connectors that are irrelevant to the congregation).[17] It is more theological in nature and it finds its authority in Peter and John's response to the Jewish council when asked about their preaching: "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19f.). The preacher simply stands before the congregation

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[14] My thanks to *Dave Bland*, my dissertation chair at the Harding School of Theology, for first guiding me to these passages.

[15] For example, *Barbara Brown Taylor* notes that she uses the orientation, disorientation, and new orientation (she refers to as "reorientation" as *Fred Craddock* did in a 1983 lecture when he appropriated *Brueggemann's* cycle as a method for preaching) cycle when developing her sermon "Bothering God" from Luke 18:1–8; Bothering God, in: Jana Childers (ed.), Birthing the Sermon. Women Preachers on the Creative Process, St. Louis 2001, 153–169. The sermon originally appeared in Home By Another Way, Lanham (MD) 1999, 199–205. *Peter K. Stevenson* and *Stephen I. Wright* provide an evaluation of Taylor's sermon and its effective use of the orientation-disorientation-new orientation schema in Preaching the Atonement, Louisville 2009, 32–34.
Additionally, *André Resner* has re-imagined the orientation-disorientation-new orientation cycle as a method of Christian proclamation: incarnation (orientation), crucifixion (disorientation), resurrection (new orientation); see Preacher and Cross. Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 1999, 110–118.

[16] *Long* (note 12), 23–47.

[17] *Paul Tillich*, Theology of Culture, Oxford/New York 1959, 213f.

and delivers the message that she or he believes God has compelled her or him to give.[18] However, as profound and influential as Long's theory has been, it does not provide the grammar of transformation that this essay seeks. Therefore, a second paradigm with a more integrated grammar was sought out.

A second example of a theological paradigm for preaching has been provided by Robert Stephen Reid in *The Four Voices of Preaching*.[19] His "four voices" paradigm is extremely useful for our discussion because it embraces four identities for preaching rather than limiting identities down to one as Long does. The immediate value in Reid's model is that, unlike Long's model, these "voices" are not homiletic structures; they are identities that preachers embody to give their sermons a theological motif or hermeneutical lens. Reid makes this claim:

> Sermon form does not create a voice. Rather, it is an individual's cultural assumptions about the nature of language and the nature of authority that provide the center of gravity that places one or another voice behind the wheel that brings a sermon to a successful destination.[20]

Reid argues that each of these "voices" has a legitimate place in preaching and the Christian theological system. As helpful as Reid's theological model is, there is one aspect that we must take issue with – it is not an integrated whole. Like Long's model, each "voice" is a separate component that can be understood individually from the other three voices. In order for preaching to be truly transformative, we must discover a model that is integrated and process-oriented. Therefore, to develop a model for preaching that is transformative and provides a continual structure that guides the process of transformative preaching that was described above, the following integrative model is proposed: Instruction; Reflection; Application; Transformation.[21]

4. Instruction

This function focuses on teaching the content of Scripture, on teaching the "what" aspect of the Christian faith. Teaching matters of faith has always been important to God. God commanded the people of Israel to make teaching matters of faith a central component of their domestic culture (Deut 6:4–8). Parents and priests were to take every opportunity available to teach the meaning of

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[18] *Long* (note 12), 22.
[19] *Reid* (note 8), 22–26.
[20] Ibid., 202.
[21] Although this integrative model is an original paradigm as described in this essay, there are other similar paradigms that influenced the development of the "transformative homiletic." For these, see *Ronald J. Allen*, The Teaching Sermon, Nashville 1999; *David J. Lose*, Confessing Jesus Christ. Preaching in a Postmodern World, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2003, 189–232; and *Haddon W. Robinson*, Biblical Preaching. The Development and Delivery of Expository MessagesGrand Rapids ²2001, 126.
Additionally, *David Helm* has recently released a volume that seems to espouse a similar approach to preaching as the one developed here. However, on closer inspection, it was discovered that Helm's view of transformation and how it occurs is radically divergent from the one developed here; see, Expositional Preaching. How We Speak God's Word Today, 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches Series, Wheaton (IL) 2014.

God's word so that the nation would grow in faith and obedience. The community of faith, in order to be a gleaming beacon of righteousness to a dark world, must understand certain fundamental teachings about God, how we relate to God, how God relates to the world, and how we relate to the world (1Tim 4:11–16). As Ronald Allen states, "In the Bible, God is the great teacher. God reveals the divine will to bless the world, as well as those things in humankind and nature that will both facilitate and frustrate blessing."[22] Thus, the Instruction component seeks to interpret the meaning of our sacred texts. This function seeks to answer the question of "What does the text say?" Preaching, in the words of Chapell, is about using "scriptural truth to convert souls and change lives."[23] In short, the Instruction function of preaching seeks to begin the transformative process by explaining the possible meaning of the text (what does the text say?).

An example of the Instruction function is found in the preaching of Bruce McLarty, now president of Harding University.[24] In a guest sermon, McLarty assisted in the fiftieth anniversary of a congregation by preaching about the future from 2 Timothy.[25] He opened by sharing a story of an Anglican congregation facing a lawsuit where the local bishop brokered a mediation session with those suing the congregation with "a book, a table, a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread." As McLarty transitioned to his message, he stated that this is what it means to be the church, and he then enumerated four lessons from his text (2Tim 4). Each point was rooted within the text and explained within the original context. Each point was presented in McLarty's matter-of-fact style, a style that believes deeply in the simple teachings of Scripture and the universal application of those teachings to today's context. In short, as he stated in his second point, "It's all there. All we need to know is in Scripture. It's all there!"

5. Reflection

This function focuses on thinking about the meaning of Scripture, on thinking about the "why" of the Christian faith. Simply studying Scripture and learning what it says is not enough for spiritual transformation. As noted above, reading Scripture and hearing sermons is simply spiritual milk. In order for transformation to eventually occur, we must challenge our values, attitudes and assumptions about our lives and how we line up against what God is calling us to become (Mic 6:6–8). Studying the cultural or linguistic background of a text can be helpful, yet its helpfulness

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[22] *Allen* (note 21), 13f.

[23] *Bryan Chapell*, Christ-Centered Preaching. Redeeming the Expository Sermon, Grand Rapids ²2005, 27.

[24] Each of the preachers examined in this section were selected because they are ministers from the Churches of Christ, have attained advanced degrees, and represent a particular preaching style and theological lens that promotes the diversity that once identified the Stone-Campbell Movement, the Christian tradition of the author. *Bruce McLarty* received his Doctor of Ministry from Ashland Theological Seminary and represents traditional Restorationist theology; *David Fleer* received a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and represents the growing minority of postliberal theologians in the Stone-Campbell Movement; and *Jeff Garrett* (Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology) represents the trending movement towards a more inclusive, Evangelical theology.

[25] *Bruce McLarty*, "Waterview 50th Anniversary PM Worship," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfKELwTIJeE; accessed 4 August 2018.

becomes null if we do not "think about these things" and how they help us grow in the image of Christ (Phil 4:8). Charles Campbell argues for an "ethic" of preaching that goes beyond simple study and "takes more seriously the enormity of the principalities and powers."[26] For Campbell, the action of preaching does not bring about transformation (a term Campbell is uncomfortable with) any more than starting a bath makes one clean. To Campbell, spiritual transformation, or responsive discipleship that demonstrates resistance to oppressive powers, occurs not when the text is discussed (as in the Instruction function) but when the implications of the text are contemplated by the listener (what does the text mean?).[27]

An example of the Reflection function is found in the preaching of David Fleer, a professor of preaching at Lipscomb University. In a sermon from Mic 6, Fleer created a courtroom scene in which a contemporary churchgoer finds himself standing before God awaiting judgment.[28] "How do you plead?" is the ringing chorus of the sermon as the man is asked about his treatment of those who are oppressed by society and who he has failed to help. The sermon, while strongly grounded in Mic 6, only hints at the textual origin. Instead, Fleer presented the sermon from the man's point of view. Those who cry out to God for justice are aligned against the man. For example, there are the Molly Maids who clean his house for minimum wage. Fleer concluded the sermon by calling the congregation to find themselves in the man's position. For Fleer, discovering the meaning of Mic 6 is not found in wading through an exegetical essay but in answering the question "How do you plead?"

6. Application

This function focuses on integrating the claims of Scripture, on implementing the "how" of the Christian faith. This function looks at Instruction and Reflection and asks if there is not something else that can be done. This function is the practical element, the "rubber meets the road" aspect of the learning and development process. Here, in order for transformation to occur, we must not only "treasure [God's] word in [our hearts]", "meditate on [God's] precepts" and "delight in [God's] statutes" (Ps 119:11–16), we must "Do [our] best to present [ourselves] to God as one approved by him" (2Tim 2:15) as one who is "equipped for every good work" (2Tim 3:17). In a recent interview, Rick Warren summed up the Application function well when he said, "The purpose of the Bible is not for doctrine, not for reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness. […] The bottom line is life change […]. If you are not having life change, you are not preaching."[29]

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[26] *Charles L. Campbell*, The Word Before the Powers. An Ethic of Preaching, Louisville/London 2002), 89, n. 2.

[27] Ibid., 141–153.

[28] The author has heard this sermon on more than one occasion, however there is no video of this sermon available; please see *David Fleer*, In Micah's Courtroom (Micah 6:1–8), in: David Fleer/Dave Bland (eds.) Preaching the Eighth Century Prophets, Rochester College Lectures on Preaching 5, Abilene (TX), 2004), 235–246.

[29] *Michael Duduit*, Purpose-Driven Preaching. An Interview with Rick Warren, www.preaching.com/resources/

In the Application function, transformation does not occur unless the teachings of Scripture are expressed in contemporary language with contemporary meaning. Ramesh Richard has developed one of the better paradigms for understanding the Application function in preaching with his application "arenas" and "avenues."[30] For Richard, the application should not simply be tacked on to the end of the sermon, but should answer the question of what we will do as a result of hearing this sermon. Richard sees five arenas where transformation occurs – five areas where we ask ourselves what kind of person God wants us to become (personal life; home life; work or study life; church life; community life). Transformation occurs when we discover not only what the text says and what the text means, but how the text impacts us in these various "arenas" of our lives (what does the text do?).

An example of the Application function is found in the preaching of Jeff Garrett, the minister for the Norway Avenue Church of Christ in Huntington, West Virginia, and a counseling professor at Marshall University. In a sermon from his series that parallels the highly-popular *The Story*[31] series from Max Lucado and Randy Frazee, Garrett focused on the story of David and Bathsheba by opening with the question, "If the walls of your house could speak, what would they say?" He described modern-day scenes of family conflict, such as abandonment or verbal abuse, as a way of setting up his text of 2Sam 11f. Similar to that of the Instruction function, Garrett walked through the text, noting significant cultural and historical markers that help hearers understand what is going on. Unlike the Instruction function, however, Garrett interspersed reflective questions and observations to help the hearers see how this passage can help them be more faithful in their own lives.[32] For example, he noted the response that David received from one of his servants when he asked for the identity of the woman bathing of the rooftop across the street by saying that God often sends us last-minute messages that warn us from venturing into spiritual danger. By identifying this woman as "the wife of Uriah the Hittite" (11:3), Garrett argued that the servant was warning David about the adultery that was in his heart. He followed this up by challenging the notion that we should not feed our lusts in order to control them, arguing that they flare out of control when we feed them. As he came to the conclusion of his sermon, Garrett focused on God forgiving David yet still holding David accountable for his sins. He turned this on the crowd saying that God will still hold us accountable for our actions, yet the grace that we receive from God is worth the pain we endure.

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articles/11565775; accessed 15 November 2013.

[30] *Ramesh Richard*, Scripture Sculpture. A Do-It-Yourself Manual for Biblical Preaching, Grand Rapids 1995, 118–121.

[31] *Max Lucado/Randy Frazee*, The Story. The Bible as One Continuing Story of God and His People, Grand Rapids ³2011.

[32] *Jeff Garrett*, The Trials of a King, www.norwayave.org/about/sermons/the-trials-of-a-king/; accessed 1 December 2013.

7. Transformation

This function focuses on integrating Instruction, Reflection and Application into a holistic theological structure, on implementing the "to what extent" of the Christian faith. This function looks at the other three functions and asks how they can be melded into one collective unit so that the message can be given its best hearing. While each of the three above functions implements a little of the other two, they each focus primarily on one particular theological component. In the Transformative function, each of the three other functions informs the other two: Instruction informs Reflection and Application; Reflection contemplates Instruction and Application; Application employs Instruction and Reflection. Transformative preaching (and, therefore, spiritual transformation) occurs when all three functions are consistently integrated in the practice of preaching. There may be times to focus more on doctrinal content, theological reflection or practical application. However these emphases must always work in cooperation, not competition with one another.

As an example of this function of preaching, I employed this function in a series of sermons from Colossians. For the series, each sermon was structured to facilitate the three "movements" of the transformative process. Each sermon began with a simple introduction to provide context to the individual sermon within the larger preaching event. This was followed by a reading and interpretation of the text (Instruction/What does the text say?). Next, the original message of the text was examined and proposed as a proclamation for the community (Reflection/What does the text mean?). Then, the proclamation was voiced in contemporary language in order to challenge the congregation to embrace the call to missional action (Application/What does the text do?). Finally, each sermon returned to the text in a submissive fashion and to accept that this is not just an ancient text but that it is our text, our message to the world (Transformation/What is the text doing?). The objective of the series was not only to study the letter of Colossians or to reflect only the doctrine of Christ present in the letter but to discern how this letter speaks as mightily today as it did in its original context. As we see below, recognizing these various theological functions not as separate functions but parts of an integrated whole will propel towards its transformative goal as we realize the spiritual power that a unified sermon can contain.

8. Preaching as Momentary Encounter

We transition now from discussing the action of preaching to discuss the object of preaching – the sermon. As was mentioned above, the sermon is not the focus of preaching. Transformation is the focus of preaching. Yet, the sermon is one conduit through which God channels the power for spiritual transformation. It is in the moment of delivering the sermon that the congregation is confronted with the "deep [that] calls to deep" (Ps 42:7) so that they are compelled to ask, "what

shall we do" (Acts 2:37)? The sermon, then, is the moment in time that allows the congregation an opportunity to enter into God's presence and dialogue with God.

9. Another Definition?

With this discussion, one may wonder if this essay seeks to offer another definition for preaching. To answer simply, yes. This essay does attempt to offer a new definition of preaching. However, it does not seek to replace other definitions, merely add to the ample amount of valuable and useful definitions. For all of the preaching that is available in Scripture, there is no one singular definition. Successful preaching seems to be defined as presenting God's word for those who would give ear, regardless of the style. For as the prophet Isaiah reminds us,

> For as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (55:10f.).

Therefore, the following definition of a transformative sermon comes not to replace but to seek further discussion.

There are two passages in Scripture that talk about the ministry of proclamation that have always intrigued me. They draw my attention because they discuss the mystery that is at the heart of preaching and of the Christian faith. The first text, which is sandwiched by Jesus' "Parable of the Soils," is Mark 4:10–12. Jesus is approached by some of his disciples and is asked why he teaches in parables. His answer, which is parabolic as well, rings of discovery. Only those who are willing to search for God will find God.[33] Those without open hearts and minds to faith will turn up their noses to the life-giving message of God.

The second passage is found in 2Cor 4:3–6. As Paul is describing his apostolic ministry, he says that those who do not accept the message of God do so because they are blind to matters of faith. He goes on to say those who have accepted grace have done so because they have been enlightened to the truth through the proclaiming of the Gospel.[34] The mystery then, it would seem, lies not only in the message itself, but in that instance between the message leaving the mouth of the one speaking and penetrating the ear of the one listening. Whether one accepts or rejects the

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[33] *Allen Black*, Mark (College Press NIV Commentary), Joplin (MO) 1995, 90f.; *Larry W. Hurtado*, Mark (NIBC New Testament Series 2), Peabody (MA) 1989, 72–74.

[34] *Paul Barnett*, The Second Epistles to the Corinthians (NICNT 8), Grand Rapids/Cambridge 1997, 215ff.; *Ralph P. Martin*, 2 Corinthians (WBC 40), Waco 1986, 78–80.

message of God depends on how the mystery is heard and received, both by the one proclaiming it and by the one listening.[35]

With these two thoughts in mind, I have developed the following definition for what makes preaching transformative. Based on this understanding of the mystery and the "hiddenness" of Scripture, transformative preaching is defined in this way:

Preaching is transformative when it is scripturally grounded, theologically informed, and culturally relevant.

In order to integrate this definition, its components must be unpacked.

First, *preaching is transformative when it is scripturally grounded*. This means that the content of preaching is found in Scripture. In 2Tim 4:1f., the aged apostle comes to his protégé and charges him to "preach the word." Knowing the background of a text is important, and being informed about what other scholars have said about it is crucial to true biblical interpretation. But if our proclamation is filled more with what biblical scholars have said, then it amounts to nothing more than a lecture. When we speak for God, our words should be those of Scripture, not of our favorite authors.

Second, *preaching is transformative when it is theologically informed*. This means that preaching looks to do more than impart knowledge, but to enlighten those who give ear to the ways and will of God. It seeks to instruct us about our life of faith and about what we are to believe. Again in 2Tim 4, the apostle cautions the young preacher about the possibility that some "will not endure sound doctrine," turning to "myths" because they want "their ears tickled" (4:3f.). Preaching must do more than offer a surface treatment of the text; it much reach deep inside the text and pull forth those teachings on faith, theology and spiritual growth that are contained within. Preaching must challenge those who give ear to reflect deeply and seriously about their faith.

Third, *preaching is transformative when it is culturally relevant*. This means that preaching looks to speak to the present culture in creative and engaging ways. In Acts 17, Paul stands before a group of Athenian scholars and proclaims the eternal truth by citing not Old Testament poets and prophets, but Greek poets and prophets. He uses points of contact that would bridge his timeless message with the contemporary context in which he found himself (e.g., 17:26 and 28). Thus, our preaching must be done in a similar fashion. We must look to connect God's message with today's world, which can only be done by being a student of culture. It must be done creatively, just as

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[35] *Andrew Purves*, Reconstructing Pastoral Theology. A Christological Foundation, Louisville/London 2004, 159f.

Jesus was creative in his use of parables and Paul in his use of sermon forms. Only in this way can we effectively handle the Word of truth and proclaim that message fresh each week.

In the end, however, preaching is about restoring people to God and recreating the people of God. In 2Cor 5:17–21, Paul talks about the ministry of reconciliation that we have received from God. As ministers of grace, we are to strive daily in this task of restoring people to their relationship with God and with one another. Regardless of how our preaching is done, it is to always be focused on the task of reconciliation. For it is in this vein that we find power for proclamation and God's power being unleashed once again on the world.

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