

Developing a Theology of preaching—Session 1¹ **Summarized and Expanded by Bob Young**

Introduction

This session seeks to provide foundational information for the preacher who is committed to developing theologically informed sermons. The session treats (briefly) the following topics: (1) the challenge of developing a meaningful preaching grid, (2) redefining the preaching task to move beyond preaching that distinguishes “us” from “them”, (3) the evangelical challenge, and (4) an alternative—thinking through new paradigms.

Meaningful Preaching

Much preaching, and especially preaching in churches of Christ, has sought to distinguish one group or church from other groups or churches. While some would argue the truth of the statement, others would affirm that such a distinction is precisely what preaching is to be about. Much preaching has been doctrinally focused, seeking primarily to establish and perpetuate some doctrinal distinctiveness. While doctrine is a valid topic in preaching, preaching doctrine with comparative doctrines always in view easily results in doctrine for the sake of doctrine, rather than doctrine to guide or alter life. “If one’s doctrine (teaching) doesn’t change one’s life, what’s the point of doctrine?” Our admission to heaven will not be based on what we know! To the extent that doctrine is the same as teaching, we have too often developed teaching, and a manner of teaching, that does not correspond to the purpose of guiding a healthy spiritual life, does not answer questions about how to live life, and does not correspond to the needs of the audience.

What is meaningful preaching? What is biblical preaching? Some would define biblical preaching as preaching that says nothing contrary to Scripture. I affirm that preaching has a greater task than avoiding conflict with the Bible. Certainly one should not contradict Scripture, but does that one characteristic necessarily make a sermon biblical? What could we learn by studying the sermons which are recorded in Scripture? What is a biblical sermon?

Frederick Buechner shares some concepts helpful in defining meaningful preaching:

- Meaningful preaching is faithful, converting, and relevant
- Meaningful preaching uses the shared stories that lead to community
- To preach Scripture is to honor the intentions of the text

Redefining Preaching

Augustine observed that when teaching and pleasing are combined, the result is persuasion. In more recent times, one can identify certain “seasons” of preaching which have focused on these three essential elements—teaching, pleasing, and persuading. A brief list of examples could include Grady David with an emphasis on persuasion (1958), Fred Craddock’s emphasis on pleasing (1971), and Thomas Long’s focus on teaching and witness (1989). Along the way, various types of preaching have been identified with different degrees of popularity—narrative preaching, inductive preaching, expository preaching, apologetic preaching, and others.

¹Summarized and adapted from notes taken during a presentation by David Fleer.

If preaching is understood as primarily focused on teaching or doctrine with little regard to the “so what” or desired results, the result is little more than some increased knowledge or awareness which rapidly fades. Many preachers, with a primary focus on doctrine, have sought to be expository (teaching), without pleasing or persuading.

Further, much of what has been passed off as expository preaching has not done an adequate job of ‘exposing’ the text in its meanings and applications.

The Evangelical Challenge

In the pluralistic culture of the U.S. in the early 21st century, many churches have seen the need for preaching that answers needs—families, finances, stability, problems...the list seems almost endless when one focuses on needs-centered preaching. Such preaching runs the risk of a focus on pleasing, preferably with teaching and persuading, but without teaching or persuading if such pleases the people and swells the crowds. At times, little teaching is done, and unfortunately, the “pleasing” in many contemporary churches is in something other than the preaching. Before one shouts “Amen” too loudly, one should also consider that in much contemporary preaching, it is not the sermon which teaches, pleases, or persuades, but only the teaching that is in the sermon. This is another way of saying that a lot of what passes for preaching isn’t, and many sermons aren’t!

Developing Alternatives

Several have raised the question of whether the churches of Christ are in danger of becoming evangelical (rather than Restorationist). Richard Hughes warns that such a move will eventually lead us to abandon our identity.

We can return to Augustine for help with the dilemma. What does effective preaching look like? How can we grow in meeting the challenge of meaningful preaching?

- It is right and to be desired that sermons involve teaching, but such must be done with a healthy dose of biblical theology, thus insuring that the message is biblical
- Rhetoric and the Christian message are combined in Scripture
- Augustine’s *De Doctrina* shows a hierarchy and interaction of dynamics.
 - eloquence without wisdom is harmful
 - wisdom without eloquence is of limited benefit
 - wisdom, truth and eloquence are really something
- We are against delight, pleasing, and entertainment simply for the sake of pleasing and increasing attendance
- Persuasion when one is moved to act loves the promise and involves the hearers emotionally

Conclusion

The challenge of meaningful, effective preaching will not be met with a changing emphasis, or seasons of preaching. The challenge is to put teaching, pleasing and persuading in each sermon.
