

Theocentric Preaching

York-Simcoe Association - Thursday, March 22, 2007

1. The challenge of theocentric preaching

1.1. Sermons must be about God

The Bible is a book about God. It is not a religious book of advice about the “answers” we need about a happy marriage, sex, work, or losing weight. Although the Scriptures reflect on many of those issues, they are above all about who God is and what God thinks and wills. I understand reality only if I have an appreciation for who he is and what he desires for his creation and from his creation.¹

The Bible is primarily a book about God and his saving acts in Jesus Christ. The human element is of course important, but it needs to be kept in perspective. Human beings are created by God, who defines our being and our destiny. God sovereignly controls all that comes to pass in human history...God and our relationship to him is the determinative characteristic in the Bible. To preach about us, our problems, and our way to a better life, and to do so without recourse to the significance of the gospel, is to radically distort the understanding of humanity and the meaning of Scripture.²

1.2. Good sermons must also connect with people

Effective sermons “try to face people's real problems with them, meet their difficulties, answer their questions, confirm their most noble faiths, and interpret their experiences in sympathetic, wise, understanding cooperation.”³

1.3. The challenge: how to preach sermons that are both relevant and about God

¹ Haddon Robinson, “The High Call of Preaching,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 23-24.

² Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 60.

³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, quoted in Calvin Miller, *The Sermon Maker: Tales of a Transformed Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 130.

2. Options

2.1. To preach theocentrically in a way that is irrelevant

Examples: Biblical sermons that are high on content and doctrine but low on application

2.2. To preach with relevance in a way that is anthropocentric

Examples:

- Jesus calms the storm (Mark 4:35-41) - “Jesus will calm the storms in your life” or “how to handle our anxieties when we travel”
- David defeats Goliath (1 Samuel 17) - “God can help you slay the giants in your life”
- Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3) - “Moses was afraid to walk through the door set before him, but he walked through it anyway. We too face doors that we must walk through.”
- Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant (Matthew 1) - “How to handle stress in your marriage”

According to a study by Preaching and Pulpit Digest, 80.5% of sermons are anthropocentric. Most sermons are not grounded in the character, nature, and will of God.⁴

2.3. To preach sermons that are both relevant and theocentric

Relevant, theocentric sermons will:

- Proclaim, from Scripture, who God is, what he wills, and what he has done, is doing, and will do
- Recount the divine drama of creation and re-creation, which finds its centre in Jesus - it connects to the main storyline of the Bible
- Helps us learn our roles within the theo-drama (i.e. is still relevant)

⁴ David F. Wells, “The D-Min-ization of Ministry,” in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 184-185.

3. Mistakes to avoid

3.1. Hermeneutical mistakes⁵

- Allegorizing - e.g. from John 2 (the wedding in Cana): “Where we are at the end of our resources, Jesus provides and shows his glory”
- Spiritualizing - e.g. “Jesus is present in the storms of life”
- Moralizing - transforming the Bible into a set of moral precepts and examples
- Imitating Bible characters - This one is controversial!

Avoid especially the fallacy of exemplarism (the idea that because someone in the Bible does it, we can or ought to do it, too). This is perhaps the most dangerous and irreverent of all approaches to application since virtually every sort of behavior, stupid and wise, malicious and saintly, is chronicled in the Bible. Yet this monkey-see-monkey-do sort of approach to applying the Scriptures is very widely followed, largely because of the dearth of good pulpit teaching to the contrary.⁶

BUT what about Hebrews 11-12, etc.?

- Separating the moral commands from gospel

Sermons often deal with a limited amount of text. Thus, they face the danger of separating “texts about Christian living from those texts that expound the nature of the gospel.”

When this happens, we can inadvertently preach law and “leave the impression that the essence of Christianity is what we do rather than what God has done.”

The alternative is to show all ethical imperatives as implications of the gospel, and to include a “gospel-based thrust” in even the ethical sections of the epistles.⁷

⁵ A good resource on these issues is Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 158-166.

⁶ Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 83.

⁷ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 59, 244.

3.2. Homiletical mistakes

- Self-help preaching

Is this sermon a Christian version of what could appear on Oprah or Dr. Phil?

Communication has become largely narcissistic – private therapy through public discourse with gurus such as Dr. Phil and Oprah. Examples of this trend are seen in contemporary preaching, a public event that uses biblical narrative to help people make their lives work. The biblical narrative thus becomes a how-to tool to help people in their private, personal lives, a kind of chicken soup for the Christian life. The biblical narrative is colonized by narcissistic, private anxieties in the service of therapy.

The type of preaching described here...offers people analgesics borrowed from the wider culture that are baptized with biblical texts. This preaching fails to cultivate an environment in which people can ask questions about the forces shaping their lives and fueling their anxiety and confusion. The image of Jesus calling Lazarus from the grave comes to mind; most preaching is about how to cope with a life wrapped in grave clothing that is never removed.⁸

- Sermons that focus on application at the expense of theology

Does this sermon provide “to-do” lists, or does it help people see reality in light of what God has done through Jesus and all the implications?

Sermons that are abstracts of Scripture may properly summarize a biblical truth, but they are unconvincing. They do not reorient our thinking. We may know the bottom line, but we don't know how to live what we know. Without a truth trail, people cannot find their own way to the outposts of truth in their own hearts...

The Bible spends much more time on shaping the spiritual mind than commanding particular behavior. We need far more training in the ways of grace, of spiritual perceptions, and of what God is really like than we do in how to communicate with our spouse. Understanding the glory of Christ is far more practical than our listeners imagine.⁹

⁸ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 67-68.

⁹ Lee Eclov, “The Danger of Practical Preaching,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 318-319.

4. Some advice

4.1. Take preaching seriously!

The sermon, not some leadership philosophy or management scheme, remains the prime means of pastoral direction and hence the pastor's paramount responsibility. The good sermon contains both script analysis and situation analysis. It is in the sermon that the pastor weaves together theo-dramatic truth and local knowledge. The sermon is the best frontal assault on imaginations held captive by secular stories that promise other ways to the good life. Most important, the sermon envisions ways for the local congregation to become a parable of the kingdom of God. It is the pastor's/director's vocation to help congregations hear (understand) and do (perform) God's word in and for the present.¹⁰

4.2. Remember that our greatest need is to see reality differently - to interpret this world in the light of what God has, is, and will do through the work of Jesus Christ.

Let us then see the first task of preaching as description. Let us move from the first goal of preaching as the production of a set of application points to the goal of unfurling a reality we could not see apart from being engulfed in the story of God from creation to redemption. The first task of preaching then is not to dissect Scripture into “nuggets” that the isolated self can put to use at its own disposal. Rather it is to preach the reality of the world as it is under the good news of the gospel, which renders all things new...

...the preacher's first job will not be to hand out more “to do” lists. Rather, it is to unfurl the reality of who God is past, present, and future so that all men and women who would submit to live in that world would then be able to understand themselves, who they are, where they are going, and what they are to do in terms of Jesus Christ and his story.¹¹

4.3. Trust that all of Scripture is relevant. Our job is not to make it relevant; it is to show its relevance.

4.4. Connect every part of Scripture - and our lives - to the storyline of the Bible, or the theo-drama, the adventure of what God is doing in the world.

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 449, 456.

¹¹ David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 142-143.