

Is There a Crisis in Preaching?

by Clayton J. Schmit

People continuously ask me, “What do you think about the crisis in preaching?” As a teacher of homiletics, it seems clear why they might seek my opinion. But, in truth, I have no greater knowledge of whether a crisis in preaching exists than any other church goer. Now that I teach instead of preaching regularly in a church, I attend a church that has faithful preaching. No crisis there. In my travels, I usually listen to myself as a guest preacher. (I leave it to others to gauge the level of crisis there.) When I hear the preaching of Fuller’s students, I get a fair sense of the rhetorical and theological talent that God is calling into the ministry. But, that is no indicator of how faithful they will be in the hard work of preparing and delivering biblical sermons in the future, nor of whether they will still be in the ministry five years after graduation. There does seem to be a crisis regarding keeping talented pastors in service. But a crisis in preaching? That is hard to judge. Still the issue keeps coming up.

It became a matter of earnest consideration for me when I met one distressed young woman in our Foundations of Ministry class. This is the basic ministry class for beginning Master of Divinity (MDiv) students in which they are introduced various aspects of their upcoming training. After giving a presentation on what they could expect when they took homiletics (or introduction to preaching), this woman asked the following question: “Why is there so much bad preaching out there?” I winced. Not because I took credit for turning out lousy preachers, although we homileticians probably all deserve our share of the blame. I winced because I did not know the

answer to her simple, direct question. I do know how to teach people to be faithful preachers. But, I don't know what happens to those who become ineffective preachers between the time they leave the seminary and when they begin to disappoint listeners. The young woman followed up her question with me after class. The urgency of her inquiry became clear to me when our discussion about her inability to find a church where the Word was proclaimed brought her to tears. That incident has stayed with me and has motivated me to investigate the issue with as many as will engage the question. I have discussed this with pastors in the U.S. and abroad, I have inquired about the issue with groups of lay people, I have discussed it with a class of military chaplains, and have considered the issue with fellow homileticians. None of us is able to declare decisively that there is a crisis in preaching. But each group has been useful in helping me assess potential reasons for ineffective preaching in the places where it occurs. Is there a crisis in preaching? The only clear answer seems to be that if a believer seeks to find a church where the Word of God is proclaimed and is unsuccessful in finding one, *there is a crisis for her*. That is serious enough an issue for us to consider the possible causes of ineffective preaching and to make some suggestions as to how things can improve. On a positive note, those who preach well may be interested to hear what these voices have to say as a way of reinforcing the faithful work they are doing. By considering things that lead to ineffective preaching, they may see in theirs the photo-negative of good work and faithful proclamation.

The ideas that follow have been developed through my conversations on the topic. I began with a small set of hypotheses as to why there is ineffective preaching. But, each group I spoke with has confirmed my assumptions and added some of their own. I call these hypotheses because they are untested by analysis. We have not

tested whether there is a crisis in preaching, nor done a survey as to why things go awry in the pulpit. These guesses are not scientific. But, they are honest responses by preachers and listeners regarding an issue that all have responded passionately about. It may be troubling to realize that so many people have had something to say about why preaching is ineffectual. On the other hand, it is refreshing to know that so many church people, lay and clergy, feel the urgent need to address the state of preaching in the church. I am grateful for their insights and share them here in the hope that they may foster further conversation about the state of preaching and encourage better practice by those who find themselves in the hypotheses that follow.

Before I list these hypotheses, a word about my choice of words. Note that I don't say "bad preaching." Whether preaching is good or bad is such a subjective issue, I choose to avoid the term. What one person might call bad may be theologically and biblically sound, yet simply uninteresting. What some might call good may be riveting entertainment, but hollow scripturally and theologically. I prefer to use the terms ineffective and ineffectual so as to be clear about the product. If preaching is not working, there should be some way to assess where it goes amiss, even if it is doing some things well. I also avoid the term "good preaching." This comes from my theological conviction (completely Barthian) that the best a preacher can do is *attempt* to preach. It is only by God's blessing through the presence of the Holy Spirit that our attempts become proclamation. In other words, it is not within human control to create a good sermon. If it is any good at all, it is a gift of grace. If it is brilliant in conception and execution, but devoid of God's blessing, it cannot be effective. The term I prefer to use is "faithful preaching." While preachers are not in charge of whether God will use our sermons for good purpose, we *are* entirely in charge of

whether we do faithful work in preparation and delivery of the message. If we serve faithfully, we are creating the best possible tools for the Holy Spirit to use. Let God make good use of our work if God wills. Let us simply be true to our call, to work diligently to proclaim God's Word to a church that is quite literally crying to hear a Word from the Lord.

Hypotheses Regarding Ineffective Preaching

1. *Preachers forget what they have been taught about faithful preaching.* Or, they have not been well trained in the basic work of textual exegesis and interpretation, contextual analysis, rhetorical composition, and delivery. The solution is to read again, or for the first time, the excellent books on the fundamentals of preaching, and learn from wise writers the basic elements of sermon construction and presentation. Even faithful preachers need refreshment and can “sharpen the saw” by keeping up on their homiletical reading. (A suggested bibliography is included in this issue to point preachers in the direction of useful material.)

2. *Preachers become too busy (or lazy) to attend to the work of faithful preaching.* The issue of laziness is an issue of spirituality and should be addressed through prayer and, perhaps, spiritual direction. But, the issue of busyness is the bane of all ministers of the Word. God calls us to many tasks as pastors and it is difficult to set priorities. All ministry tasks are important. Yet, pastors are called to preach as chief among their responsibilities. Let preachers make preaching a priority in their weekly schedules; and let congregations understand that in order to preach effectively, their pastors need time to pray, study, meditate, cogitate, create, read, write, re-write, and practice, as well as Sabbath time to let the sermon settle and become internalized. One more word

about laziness: some preachers are so gifted that they are able to speak well with little preparation. It is tempting to rely on this gift and give short shrift to proper preparation. Peter Storey, a Methodist Bishop from South Africa, and a chief combatant in the church's fight against apartheid, confessed that he had been given such a gift and abused it early in his ministry. He reports that "God took that gift away." From then on, he learned that preaching well was a matter of careful, prayerful, and focused work. He is an exemplary preacher today, but not because of rhetorical gifts. He achieves excellence through hard work.

3. *Preachers reach the point in their ministry where they think what they have to say is more relevant than what the scriptures have to say on a subject or issue.* This is perhaps the greatest danger for preaching. How does one call a preacher back from the brink of such hubris? This may not be a common concern, but it exists. Pastors dispense psychological suggestions, lectures on morality, and self-help advice under the guise of preaching. Homiletician Richard Lischer has said that God's people will only trust what preachers have to say when they are convinced that it is the Word of God.¹ What the church needs most from pastors is the humility to empty themselves before the Word and seek God's response to the needs and concerns of their people. There are fitting times and places for pastoral opinion. The pulpit is reserved for God's opinion. Perhaps the article by Rich Gorsuch in this issue will be of value to preachers with personality concerns.

4. *Preachers have a lack of rhetorical skill or creativity.* Every preacher with any amount of experience knows that God can use a poor delivery or badly shaped message for good purpose. We preachers are grateful to know that the Holy Spirit can show up even if we don't. But, it is not up to God to do all our work for us. God depends on us

to do this work and to use all our skill and our capacity for learning new techniques to make our sermons as effective as possible. Bishop William Willimon once prayed, “God, forgive us for making the Gospel boring.” There are numerous useful books that can guide preachers in bringing creativity and interest to their work.

5. *Preachers treat the sermon as an event of human communication rather than the living proclamation of God’s Word.* This indicates a failure of theology. St. Paul makes it clear repeatedly in his writings that preaching is God’s Word. The reformers knew it and relied upon it. Barth insisted on it and Bonhoeffer declared that “the proclaimed word is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word.”²

Preachers with the opposite view may find voices to support them. One teacher of preaching has said, “When the speaker is in touch with God and then exposes his or her God-filled heart in a moving public address, God can go to work there.”³ Certainly, this is true, but it is no substitute for praying over a text and listening for God’s leading as you work the scriptures to reveal the voice of the living God. The sermon is God’s Word, not the occasion for undisciplined, heart-felt testimonial. While God may choose to work in unexpected ways—even in textual sermons that are dull, unimaginative, or poorly constructed; or in testimony and devotional talks—we do not presume that God is in our human speech. Because all preaching is an attempt at proclamation, preachers need to make the most faithful attempt and ground their work in scripture in order that God might inhabit their words and make them God’s human speech.⁴ The best solution for this concern may be for preachers to prayerfully reexamine their theology of preaching and their sense of call. Ordained ministry is Word and Sacrament ministry. Reading Karl Barth’s small book on preaching, *Homiletic*, may help to readjust one’s theological perspective.

6. *Preachers omit the promise of God's love and turn sermons into ethical discourse.*

Here is another theological issue. From Augustine, who wrote the first book on preaching (see bibliography), onward, we have known the need to balance the Law and the Gospel in preaching. If preachers omit the good news and simply preach the Law, sermons become moralistic harangues. The truth is that people don't need preachers to tell them how bad they are. They know that better than we do. What people need is assurance of God's love and the benefits that are part of God's grace. In 2 Corinthians, Paul says, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." (5:17) We can become better people because of Christ who saves us and empowers us to be new creations. We cannot achieve it on our own. Sermons need to announce this. Peter Storey once gave this advice to preachers: "The night before you preach, read through your sermon. If it doesn't contain good news, throw it away!" Preachers needing a review of how to balance Law and Gospel in sermons, or a description of the dangers of moralist preaching can find excellent treatments in Richard Lischer's *A Theology of Preaching*.

7. *Preachers assume that the listener is responsible to get the message.*

Proclamation of the Word is the preacher's responsibility. While preachers may hope people listen to all they say, when the sermon is interesting, preachers make it difficult for people to hear the Word. We need to be grateful for the work of the Holy Spirit who achieves the amazing goal of getting people to church in the first place. Luther said that the Holy Spirit "gathers" us together. Preachers need to take it from there. Some people come with sleep-filled eyes, others struggle with their children to arrive on time. Some have hangovers, others are worried or depressed. Preachers cannot expect people to take responsibility for being attentive for twenty or thirty minutes on top of that. We need to learn to create enough interest to capture listener's imagination

and hold it. There is much published advice about writing evocatively and bringing the sermon alive in delivery. The solution here, again, is to take advantage of the many good resources that teach preachers to be creative and interesting.

8. *Preachers use the pulpit to seek their “fifteen minutes of fame.”* Andy Warhol could not have known how prescient his words were when he predicted that everyone would have their brief moment of glory. Today, fame seems to be an entitlement sought by countless ordinary people. The most common folks can be on a tv game show, get an appearance on *American Idol*, apply for a televised makeover, or star in a *Survivor* episode. Nowadays, it is easy for any minister to self publish books and sell them to promote their churches and their ministry.

The temptation for preachers is to be known as a great preacher. But, that is not our calling. God may need a few well-known preachers to broadcast the Word. But most of us are called to do the humble, faithful work of preaching in local congregations, small to middling, and to feed the flocks God has given us in those places. To repeat, preachers should not seek to be good, but to be faithful. The prayer for humility is a necessary one for those who proclaim God’s Word.

9. *Preachers fail to perceive the world accurately or to retrieve images as needed for sermon use.* Preachers need to be like poets. They are always on the lookout for what is going on in the world. They use their senses to see things clearly and capture them so that they can be recalled later when needed. Poets know how to make vivid descriptions of real life incidents so as to bring life to their work. Preachers must do the same. We seek sermon illustrations constantly. Let us learn to find them all around us and to describe the world in such a way that our sermons become real enough for listeners to recognize and to engage. This is one of the key ways to make sermons

interesting.

One of the people preachers love to quote is Mark Twain. This is not because of his theological insight. It is because he was a superb observer of the human condition. Preachers can learn this art in a most natural way. Read great books. See good movies. Spend time just looking at the beauty, or the struggle or pain around you. Store the images of those observations in the library of your memory and check those vivid images out as needed when you seek to speak truthfully about the world.

10. Preachers can fail to believe the message they are called to proclaim. This can happen to anyone. All believers are assailed with doubts from time to time. Pastors and preachers have the same temptation. Some may even suffer from the notion that God cannot forgive them for some great sin. If the preacher is in a place where he or she cannot speak God's Word with conviction, listeners may well feel that their sermons lack authenticity. To be in such a spiritual state is no shame. Most Christians benefit from spiritual counsel from time to time. Pastors can search out trusted colleagues to serve as confessors and confidants. Their preaching will ring with conviction when they have been assisted through their own faith struggles. It may even improve because they have come to understand the spiritual struggles of their people.

12. Preachers may fear to speak prophetic words. Most people want to be liked. No one likes to bear bad news. But, sometimes the word God needs to have proclaimed is a word of challenge. The Gospel message is one of grace, but it is also one that can jar us out of complacency or inactivity. When such a word is needed, preachers can take refuge in a technique mastered by William Willimon. He says that on occasion, he hides behind the text. He pushes God's Word out and cowers behind it. If people say to him on the way out of church, "Pastor, I really disagreed with you

today,” he delights in saying: “You don’t disagree with me. You disagree with Jesus.” Of course, to do this, you need to do your exegesis well, in order to trust that what you said was what Jesus wanted.

13. Preachers may conclude that they are finished with sermon preparation too soon.

The temptation in writing sermons is to stop when you have determined what to say. This moment may occur when you have achieved a solid outline or the first draft of a manuscript. But, wise preachers know that we seek not only what to say, but how to say it in the best way. Achieving that level of preparation means careful editing, re-writing, and ample practice of the delivery. These things take time. Those who write their sermons on Saturday night do not have time to bring the message to a proper finish. Solution: plan your week well and start early enough to attend to the end-game. This can make all the difference between a sermon that is highly effective and one that is flat or dull. As a simple reminder, think of the sermon the way poet’s think about the poem. Stephen Dobyns puts it this way: “Best words, best order.”

14. Preachers may not trust the power of language to achieve their goals. Everyone, it seems, is telling preachers today that words have lost their power. This is simply untrue. Words are the preacher’s basic tool. We need to trust that they will carry the freight of God’s Word as they always have. Powerpoint and moving images may add sparkle or finesse to a preacher’s presentation. But, they are no substitute for carefully crafting our language so as to speak with clarity, precision, and depth. Well told stories and illustrations that use evocative, sensory language convey meaning and truth today as well as ever. I not only disbelieve the lie that says young people do not listen to words or stories today, I have developed a little scheme to prove it in my preaching classes. At certain points in my lectures, I purposely use stories and evocative

language, much as I suggest we do in preaching. Then, at those times when my mostly young audience leans forward in anticipation of how a story will end, or when they listen so intently as to create one of those pin-drop moments, I call them on it. I draw their attention to the fact of their rapt attention. It disproves anything they might hear about not trusting words. Then, I adjure them to trust words in their own work and learn how to use them with precision and power.

15. Preachers may not know what it means to preach faithfully. One of the most frustrating things we can be asked to do in life is to excel at something we don't know how to do. This can be the problem with preaching. When I graduated from seminary, I knew how to write a sermon according to the rules given in my preaching class. But I did not know what it meant to write a good sermon. I knew one when I heard one, but had no idea of how to cook one up myself. When I began to teach preaching, I made a point of helping students understand what it means to do faithful work in sermon preparation. I teach that they should strive to be faithful in five areas. When they have done so, they ought to have an effective sermon. These five areas are: careful work with the scriptural text, deep understanding of the context or audience to whom they will speak, solid understanding of theology, and engagement of the minds and hearts of the audience. There are many issues involved in being faithful to these tasks, but they boil down to manageable activities. For those who need remedial help in these areas, the bibliography holds many resources.

Conclusion

These hypotheses about the state of preaching may be difficult to prove. Some of them may be more apt than others. Some may simply be false guesses. They are offered as a way to stimulate thought and conversation among preachers and listeners.

And, there may be many more reasons why preaching fails. My prayer is that preachers commit or recommit themselves to faithful work in preparation for preaching. Nothing less is at stake than the faith of the people God places in their care. How can they believe if someone does not preach to them? With faithful work, any crisis that exists in preaching can be overcome, one pulpit at a time.

¹ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1992), p. 48.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Proclaimed Word," in *Theories of Preaching*, ed. Richard Lischer (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1987), p. 28.

³ Joseph Webb, "A Reply, both Academic and Personal, to Paul Scott Wilson's 'Radical Postmodern: A Prophetic Ethics,'" *Academy of Homiletics papers*, 2004, p. 242

⁴ Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).