

Homiletical Principles in the Light of Nehemiah 8:1-12

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Sekkyo-gaku is defined as the study or art of making easily understood or making clear that or those things which are not understood. In other words, it is the art of teaching and thus preaching. Preaching, of course, has an ancient history in Japan. The first *kanji*, *toku*, to explain, was and still is used exclusively as a term for a Buddhist priest teaching or making clear; preaching to people who do not understand or know the teachings of *Shyakasama* (Buddha).

Preaching in the Christian sense did not come to Japan until three years after the death of Martin Luther. On August 15, 1549, the Catholic priest-missionary, Xavier, was received “kindly by the feudal lord of Satsuma, who significantly granted him permission to preach throughout his fief.”¹ Some 50 years later, preaching, indeed Christianity, was banned in all Japan. No public preaching was done between 1597 and 1873. Preaching in the Protestant-Christian sense did not occur until the early months of 1873 after the anti-Christian edict was removed from the public notice boards on February 19, 1873. The anti-Christian edict was rescinded just over 101 years ago, so it is also understandable that homiletics and homiletical principles are of deep interest to the Japanese Bible student, although the word homiletics as for the average American does not have much meaning. By looking at the *kanji*, the average Japanese knows that *sekkyo-gaku* or homiletics means making clear by teaching or explanation of that which is not known, This is unfortunate, since it gives the impression that the Bible is a difficult book and cannot be understood without explanation.

The term homiletics, as we know it, is derived from *ὁμοῦ*, “together,” and *ἵλη*, “a crowd and thus signifying a being or living together, an assembly, then intercourse, to converse.”² In 1 Cor. 15:33, Paul uses the words *ὁμιλῖαι κακαί* to denote the evil influence exerted by their heathen countrymen upon members of the congregation in Corinth. The A.V. translates “evil communications.” Luke uses *ὁμιλεῖν* in the conversation of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. Luke 24:14-15. He uses the same term of Paul’s talk with Festus, Acts 24:26. In addition, he uses the same word for the sermon delivered by Paul at Troas, Acts 20:11. In Heb. 10:19-25, we find that *homologia* is a mutual speaking by which all are teaching and admonishing one another. From this beginning root-meaning our word homiletics took on the meaning of the art or science of preaching. “We employ, therefore the term ‘Homiletics’ to designate the science and art of the sermon in this sense, since none other, either as to history or linguistic usage, so exactly expresses the idea of the congregational sermon.”³ In other words, homiletics is the how of preaching.

Preaching is a term which in English has taken a terrible beating, and is misunderstood by many from the “old man” in the pew who says, “Boy, the preacher really gave it to THEM today,” to the young teenager who tells his “old Man,” “stop preaching to me.” Real homiletic preaching “proclaims a message. The message is from God, God wants to tell men about the life which He has for them as a gift. As men are born into the world, they do not have this life. Preaching tells of God’s gift of life which He gave to them through His Son, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross. Preaching does more than tell of this gift of life. It gives it.”⁴

We are all familiar with the parting words of the Savior as they are written above the chancel arch in the Seminary chapel. “Preach the Gospel!” St. Paul too gives a summary of the content of his preaching, “Now let me remind you, brothers, of what the Gospel really is, for it has not changed – it is the same Good News I preached to you before. You welcomed it then and still do now, for your faith is squarely built upon this wonderful message, and it is this Good News that saves you if you firmly believe it, unless of course you never really believed it in the first place. I passed on to you right from the first what had been told to me, that Christ died for our sins just as the Scriptures said he would and that he was buried, and that three days afterwards he arose from the grave just as the prophets foretold” (1 Cor. 15:1-4). This was the same preaching of the Apostles that landed them in a Jerusalem prison, “The Council...had them beaten and then told them never again to

speak in the name of Jesus, and finally let them go. They left the Council Chamber rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for His name. And everyday, in the Temple and in their home Bible classes they continued to teach and preach that Jesus is the Messiah” (Acts 5:40-42). Look how Jesus Himself gives a similar summary of the content of preaching. “And He said, ‘Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah must suffer and die and rise again from the dead on the third day; and that this message of salvation should be taken from Jerusalem to all the nations: There is forgiveness of sins for all who turn to me” (Luke 24:46,47).

“Apart from the Word of God there can be no sermon. On the Word of God the sermon is based, from the Word it draws its content. Indeed, the sermon is nothing else than the offer and proclamation of the Word.”⁵ “The sermon becomes a testimony of sin and grace, since the Fall and Protevangel, the two chief factors in the relation between God and man, a testimony of the sin and the forgiving grace of God in Christ. This makes the sermon, on the one hand, a testimony of the holiness of God which punishes and condemns the sinner; for the cross of Calvary is the supreme revelation of God’s wrath upon sin. In this sense it must proclaim the law; The center of the sermon will, however, always be the Gospel, the testimony of the grace of God, forgiving sin and conferring righteousness.”⁶

If this is the content of real homiletical preaching the purpose and importance of homiletics is clear as stated previously, “God wants to tell men about the life which He has for them as a gift. As men are born into the world they do not have this life. Preaching tells of God’s gift of life which He gives to men through His Son, Jesus Christ.”

The subject matter or content of the sermon is without a doubt the chief thing. But if this material is presented in an inadequate form or manner, its latent power can not make itself felt as it should and its edifying effect will be gravely impaired and possibly neutralized. “A proper regard for the material and purpose of the sermon demands therefore that careful attention be given to its structure” and the other rules or principles of homiletics.

Next to the Word itself as content of the sermon a basic rule of homiletics is getting to know the text. This, of course, means a thorough investigation of the meaning of the text. In other words, making the text the preacher’s very own. When the text has been properly studied and analyzed, the sermon structure can be planned with the construction of an outline, with a theme and division of parts. The decision on the theme and parts almost automatically brings with it a decision on the type of sermon: analytic, synthetic, analytic-synthetic or homily. While expanding the outline into a full fledged sermon, three things ought to be kept in mind. “1.) Never forget the text. 2.) Never permit the course of the sermon to deviate from the outline and 3.) constantly keep the people or hearers in mind.”⁷

While a preacher cannot add to the effectiveness of the Word, the effectiveness of that Word can be hindered by poor preaching or delivery. “Almost inevitably a good free delivery is more effective than the best of reading.”⁸ Many hours are spent in preparing a sermon. But it is of no value except to the preacher personally, until it is delivered to the people and actually reaches the minds and hearts of the people.

One thing is certain, the delivery of Ezra and his helpers must have been nearly perfect, because of the tremendous effect of the Word of God on the hearts of the people. But just how did Ezra and his Levite helpers use the principles of homiletics or didn’t they? In other words, what light can Nehemiah chapter eight shed on homiletic principles? In order to answer these questions, it will be of some help to review dust a bit of the background of Nehemiah chapter eight.

Nehemiah himself was the cupbearer, apparently a trusted and important official at the court of Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes, the son of Xerxes, famed for fighting the Greeks and a step-son of Queen Esther, ruled Persia from 465-425 BC. Nehemiah had, as is well-known, secured permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall of the Holy City. But old enemies of the Jews, (Moabites, Ammonites, and the Samaritans, etc.) by arms and by intrigue at the court of Artaxerxes bitterly opposed the re-fortification of Jerusalem. However, under Nehemiah’s skilled direction and by working around the clock, the wall was completed in just 52 days. After the completion of the wall, Nehemiah and Ezra gathered the people to begin the organization of their national life. At the same time, “in Mid-September, all the people assembled at the plaza in front of the Water

Gate and requested Ezra, their religious leader, to read to them the Law of God.” The motive for this desire on the part of the people is undoubtedly their desire to keep the new moon of the seventh month as a feast of thanksgiving for the gracious assistance they had received from the Lord during the building of the wall. This feeling of thankfulness moves them to request a reading of the Word of God.

“So Ezra the priest brought out to them the scroll of Moses’ laws. He stood on a wooden stand made especially for the occasion so that everyone could see him as he read. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people.” Beside Ezra on the podium stood several assistants and they read and expounded the Word. “And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.” It is very clear that Ezra’s words were the words of the Lord and that those who expounded, expounded on that very same Word. In other words, it was the message of the living God, that was the sum and substance, the basis of what was proclaimed at the Water Gate plaza. That is as we have seen the most basic rule of homiletics. A rule so basic that we, I am sure, take it for granted but as we will hear in some of the reports, a rule that is no longer taken for granted. It is a principle that is being called into question by an ever wider group of people on the mission fields of the world. You and I dare not take it for granted.

The type of outline, type of sermon, and the style of delivery used those seven days in September is rather difficult to determine from the text. In fact, Keil and Delitzsch say the following with regard to verse 8. “It is more correct to suppose a periphrastic exposition and application of the law, but not a distinct recitation according to appointed rules.”⁸ One thing is crystal clear, the people to a man understood the intent and meaning of the Word. If rules regarding outlines, introduction, conclusion, synthetic or analytic sermons and memorized sermons, etc, make the message of the living God more understandable and comprehensible to our people then we had better use them even though Ezra and his helpers apparently did not. But their message, rather we should say, God’s message, went right where it should have, to the hearts of the people. “All the people began sobbing when they heard the commands of the law.” Finally, to get to the hearts of the people with the message of the living God is the purpose of all homiletic rules and in fact the reason for our being gathered here on foreign soil today. Ezra and his helpers apparently modified the rules of homiletics which they normally would have used in the temple service. In the same way we, as different situations confront us, may have to adapt the rules of homiletics to peculiar situations.

It is conceivable that the rules of homiletics might change and improve and undoubtedly they have changed from those September mornings in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes. But one thing that is just as certain for you and I as for Ezra is that any sermon we preach must be based on and proclaim the Word. But can we really with such confidence hold that to be valid? “May the sermon in this modern world proclaim nothing but the old Word of God? Ought this Word not rather to be modified, supplemented, touched up, or even replaced by something new? Isaiah long ago gave the answer: ‘The grass withereth, the flower fadeth because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth but the Word of our God shall stand forever.’ And Jesus said, ‘Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words shall not pass away.’”¹⁰

Footnotes

¹ R. Drummond, *A History of Christianity in Japan*, pp. 37.

² M. Reu, *Homiletics*, pp. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 9.

⁴ R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church*, pp. 1.

⁵ M. Reu, *Homiletics*, pp. 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 60.

⁷ “Junior Homiletics Notes,” pp. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 24.

⁹ Keil & Delitzsch, *Old Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 3, pp. 67.

¹⁰ M. Reu, *Homiletics*, pp. 47.

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