

Areas of the Homiletician's Task that Call for Attention

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I don't know exactly why the Program Committee assigned this topic for consideration at our pastoral conference, but I have a hunch. It is sometimes assumed that most preachers approach their pulpit work with the attitude: "I'm about as good a preacher as God has equipped me to be, as good a preacher as the congregation has a right to expect me to be." I wonder whether most preachers really feel that way about their preaching. Perhaps you share my feeling that, in all likelihood, there are few ministers who feel they're preaching as well as they can or as well as they would like. That in itself would be reason enough for our conference periodically to include a presentation on some phase of homiletics. There is a significant relationship between the quality of a congregation's worship life and the congregation's spiritual growth.

The title given to this essay indicates that it will attempt to pinpoint a number of problem areas that confront a pastor as he prepares his sermon each week. The essay will point to five of these areas; obviously the list is not exhaustive. The five areas were chosen, first of all, because the essayist has recognized them as problem areas in his own sermon preparation. Besides that, ten years of working with student homileticians have demonstrated that these are areas they also have problems with.

A major obstacle to effective pulpit work is our own inertia. The longer one serves in the ministry the more set he becomes in his homiletical habits, and the less likely he is to suspect himself and to question his own sermon procedures. I've never been to Alaska, but somebody told me that there's a sign at the beginning of the Alcan Highway which says: "Pick your rut carefully. You're going to be in it for the next 1500 miles." Each of us has created his own sermon preparation ruts, ruts which are so familiar and so comfortable that we're tempted to grow satisfied with them.

One such problem area may very well be the matter of choosing a theme for your sermon. Here the rule must be: to faithfully reflect your sermon text, be sure your sermon theme is a theme, and not a topic. The term "theme" is etymologically identical to the word "proposition," defined by the dictionary as "the point to be discussed or maintained in argument, usually stated in sentence form." The main thought of a text (and that's what the sermon theme ought to be) can be expressed only in the form of a proposition. It's sloppy homiletics to be content with a general topic or title. No Bible text treats a subject in a general way, but has something very specific to say about it. Dr. John Fritz says: "The theme is the specific thought of the text which distinguishes that text from other texts treating the same subject matter." (*The Preacher's Manual*, p.33).

This homiletical principle excludes choosing a concept as a theme, e.g. "Brotherly Love," or "The Kingdom of God." A general concept like this doesn't express the unity of the text. For example, instead of treating the subject "Peace with God" generally, a text might emphasize the importance of being at peace with God, or contain instructions about the way to peace with God, or may illustrate what results peace with God will have in our heart and life. If I choose "Peace with God" as my sermon theme, I ought to recognize I can't possibly hope to treat that topic exhaustively in a sermon. The more precisely you define your theme (and that will be determined by your interpretation of the text), the easier it will be for you to let that truth control the entire logical progression of the sermon.

When deciding upon his sermon theme, then, it's the preacher's duty to state in a clear and definite way just what the text means to convey. Last week a student submitted a tentative outline with the theme: "Sermons and Sinners." Unless you knew that his sermon text was Romans 1: 13-20, you couldn't possibly have deduced that from that sermon topic. You'll be glad to learn that the student later revised that into "The Gospel is a Power." This morning in homiletics class a student preached a sermon on Romans 8: 1-9. The three major truths he had distilled from his study of the text were the following:

- I. We are free from the requirements of the law;
- II. We are free from the consequences of sin;
- III. We are free to live for God.

Now what would you say would be a good theme summarizing those parts? How about “Christian Freedom”? That’s not a theme. Again, that’s a topic. Announcing that topic doesn’t even tell your hearers whether you’re for Christian freedom or against it. The student’s sermon theme was: “We Christians are Free!” How much more helpful that is than a topic would have been!

Before moving to the second area to be discussed in this essay, permit a slight digression to consider a matter often forgotten by the homiletician when he formulates the major parts of the sermon outline. The major divisions of the sermon are the main truths which The Spirit of God intended to emphasize in a particular Scripture text. Every one of us has faced the temptation to forget this and, when formulating the major parts of the sermon, to think not only in terms of exegesis but also of application. But this is illegitimate. Evaluate the following sermon outlines on Exodus 14:10-27 and John 6: 1-14:

The Lord Leads His People

- I. Israelites
- II. Americans

The Lord Feeds His People

- I. In the desert
- II. At your dinner table

There’s nothing wrong with those two sermon themes, but there is something drastically wrong with the parts. In each case the second part is not drawn from the text. The homiletical rule—and it’s a good one—is: the sermon’s major parts must flow from the text.

When you write your sermon each week, whom do you address? Is it enough for you to plan your message for a congregation of believers? Here is an area where blithe assumptions and unrealistic generalizations can seriously restrict the effectiveness of the sermon. In order not to talk past your audience, address the sermon to all of your hearers, not just to a select few.

Who are the people who make up your audience each week? Normally there will be at least four segments of people in terms of their attitudes toward you and your message. In addition to the believers, there will be the apathetic. There will be people with doubts, and there will usually be some who are hostile to your message.

The preacher must win and hold the attention of the apathetic. He will present doubters with convincing facts. The hostile he must seek to win with the first words he speaks and to persuade of the dreadful consequences of rebelling against the expressed will of our great and good God.

The believers in the audience present one of the preacher’s greatest challenges. For one thing, there are more of them, and they are the ones most likely to become dissatisfied with a vague, general, abstract presentation. Within the past month a close personal friend who is a layman—and, I should add, a very perceptive man as well as a committed Christian—made this casual remark about his pastor’s sermons: “I know what he’s going to say. I’ve heard it a thousand times.”

What an incentive for a preacher to ask himself: “Am I preaching “the Gospel according to Platitude?” Have I developed one or two ways of expressing the Gospel, so that I never want to venture beyond the security and comfortableness they provide?” But my pet formula may be too familiar to the hearer, so that when he hears the code words (“God loved the sinful world so much that ...”) he’s tempted to respond: “Oh, that again. I wonder why he bothers to tell me.” Is it possible that we’re satisfied to present the credal facts (perhaps by reciting John 3:16 or large sections of Luther’s explanations to the Articles) without explaining their significance?

The charge has often been raised that much 20th Century preaching is unrelated to life in the 20th Century. Helmut Thielecke, e.g., has said: “Our preaching is, to be sure, largely correct, exegetically ‘legitimate,’ workmanlike, and tidy; but it is also remarkably dead and lacking in infectious power. Very often it strikes us as an unreal phantom that hovers above and is isolated from what people feel are the actual realities of their life.” (*Encounter with Spurgeon*, p. 2). Perhaps you agree with that charge; perhaps you don’t. But

surely we will agree that before a preacher can relate a sermon to somebody's need, he must know what those needs are. And simply to dismiss this assignment by saying, "The needs of people today are no different from what they were at the time of Martin Luther" does not strike your essayist as the intelligent opinion of a concerned shepherd.

What are the needs which we will address in our sermons, needs in which people are calling for help? As you answer that question (and you have to answer it each week), beware of being too general and saying, "Sin is the big need to which I preach, and the devil is another." It will help if we will be more specific in pinpointing the need to which the sermon will address itself. A homiletics instructor of mine thirty-five years ago used to speak of the malady from which the sermon is to free the hearer. In the essayist's opinion, here is another area of the homiletician's task that calls for attention. To speak to human need, and to emphasize the remedy you're offering, contrast it with the corresponding malady.

Here is a very basic step in constructing a sermon. The persuasion that you hope to accomplish with your sermon depends on the hearer's awareness of what he's being freed from and on his desire for that freeing. When we analyze our sermon writing procedures, how easy it is to overlook this basic fact, to content ourselves with spotting a few symptoms of ungodliness, and then building the sermon around them. Now spotting the symptoms can be helpful, but we dare not content ourselves with treating symptoms. That's the easy pitfall of preaching against S-I-N-S instead of against S-I-N. Mention the symptoms, of course, (lovelessness, e.g., or fear and worry, or dirty sex) but only as evidence of a deeper malady from which your sermon wants to free the hearer. The following paragraphs list a representative number of these maladies, together with the appropriate, God-given remedy. The list is not intended to be exhaustive, and several additional examples are given in a listing on the last page of this essay.

The basic malady which afflicts every one of our hearers and their pastor as well is that man, designed for God, is separated from God—by nature, and often by choice. Our first parents refused to be responsible to God, and we are their children in more ways than one. We're smart enough to know that if a fish was designed by God to live in water, then it can't be happy on our living room carpet, but each day of every year of our lives we try to live out of our element. Isaiah was describing the basic malady not only of the 8th Century B.C. but also of the 20th Century A.D. when he confessed: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way," and again, that this has "separated you from your God."

What's the particular remedy which God has supplied for this malady? To counter our basic problem of separation from God, the Scripture offers us the wonderful assurance: "Through our Lord Jesus we have now received the atonement, the repairing of the breach, the restoring of that shattered relationship.

Related to the basic malady of the sinner's separation from God is a second one: enmity against God. Have we helped our hearers to make this diagnosis of their own spiritual condition? God designed us to live under him as his children, and we insist on living alongside him as equals, claiming the right to disagree with him in making decisions and in establishing life's priorities. God's remedy for this particular malady is that we who were born enemies of God have been reconciled to God.

A related malady enters our life when God must reaffirm his unwillingness to let his creatures play God. "Let no one deceive you with empty words," Paul once wrote to the Ephesians "Because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient." After we have paid special attention to that malady, Paul's assurance to his readers at Rome seems all the more beautiful to us: "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Before his first children took that fateful step away from him in Paradise, God pointed out what the consequences would be: "When you eat of it you will surely die." Here is a drastic metaphor God uses to describe the condition of the person who breaks off the intimate relationship between the Creator and the creature. According to God, that person is a walking corpse. And if his condition is not reversed by a miracle of the Holy Ghost, it will become irreversible. The remedy God in grace has provided to this malady of death is life. Grace, we know, is not just getting something for nothing; it's getting the very opposite of what we deserve—in this case, life for death.

We often say in sermons that the basic malady is sin. The statement is, of course, true, but I don't think the statement is as helpful or as meaningful to people as we like to think it is. The reason is that the word "sin" can have several quite different meanings in the Scripture. It may refer to the sinner's act of rebellion (Hebrew *pesha'*), breaking faith with God. How important that we share this picture with people who are regularly exposed to an ethic which says: "You are your own boss. What you do with your life, your body, your money is your own business." But we who were rebels now have the testimony of the Spirit within us, leading us to say with David: "To do your will, O my God, is my desire; your law is within my heart."

The word "sin" can refer in the Scripture not only to the act of rebellion, but to the consequences as well. Sin is often pictured as a debt, a load of guilt, which must be removed if the sinner is ever to live in God's presence. To sinners burdened with a load of guilt we can bring the Savior's wondrous invitation: "Here, let me take that load of guilt; let me carry it." The Gospel remedy for guilt is the assurance of forgiveness.

The word "sin" may connote still a third malady. In Romans 7, e.g., sin is presented as an active evil power in the heart and life of every Christian. Paul speaks of not doing what he wants to do, and of doing what he hates. Then he draws the conclusion: "If I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it." It's only when the sinner realizes this malady that he can appreciate the remedy God has supplied here—a remedy about which many preachers are strangely silent. God announces that sin's evil dominion has been broken in us. Instead of being a slave all my life to an evil power that is active within me, the Gospel offers release from sin's power. The chains that bound me in slavery to Satan are broken; I have been set free to serve God, to seek his glory in everything.

One of the most frightening statistics I've heard in a long time was a statistic announced by Dr. George Gallup. According to him, 51% of Americans think that life is basically boring. What malady do you see reflected here? Isn't it the meaninglessness of life without God at its center? Solomon emphasized this several dozen times in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Even if we don't agree with Gallup's percentages, each of us knows that many members of our congregations are not appreciating life as they ought to and as they would like to. If we were to ask these people: "Well, how are things going?" they'd probably smile and answer: "Fine!" But deep down they might very well be thinking: "There's got to be more to life than I have found!" To such people God offers a valid goal, a satisfying goal, which will enrich all of life and that is "Everything to the glory of God!"

The point of this lengthy elaboration of some of the maladies to which our sermons must address themselves is that a sermon may be doctrinally correct and still not touch the hearts of our hearers if they feel it's isolated from what they feel are the actual realities of their lives. When Christ preached, he met people on their level. Do you see another advantage to a sermon's being specific in identifying the malady and the remedy? Basically, a preacher has the same message to present Sunday after Sunday, year after year. If his preaching is not to become monotonous and repetitious, if his proclamation is to remain fresh and vigorous over a period of years, he will do well to copy the Scripture's many-splendored presentation of the rescue and release Christ brings us.

One of the factors contributing to ineffective preaching may very well be the language of the sermon. And so the rule must be to make sure your message is clearly understood, be sure your pulpit language is intelligible to your hearers.

To many hearers, preachers who ascend a pulpit seem to speak in a strange language spoken only in churches. What's the reason for that? No doubt there are many; let me mention two. It's easy for a pastor to live in his own private world of thought and experience. He assumes, therefore, that what is clear to him is, or at least should be, clear to his hearers.

There may be another reason. It's a bit frustrating in every sermon to have to explain the important concepts on which Christian faith rests, and the important connections between doctrines. Preachers, being human, are tempted to take the easy way out. One of the most appealing shortcuts in sermonizing is to bypass the difficult and time-consuming job of explaining the abstract idea. Why not just refer to "the flesh" instead of

describing that heathen within us? Instead of explaining the particular aspect of God's rescue operation which the sermon text pictures, why not just refer to it as "salvation?"

It's the essayist's conviction that oftener than we think our message is unclear to the people whom we want to reach. "The things of this world" -what's that supposed to mean to Joe or Jane Christian? "The kingdom of God" can mean several different things in Scripture; what concrete idea does that present to the Christian who hears his pastor throw out the expression in the sermon without explanation? If I shoot over the heads of my hearers, this does not prove I have superior ammunition. It proves only that I'm a poor shot.

Every time you deliver a sermon you're speaking two languages simultaneously. One is the language of the mind; that's the language written out on the pages of your sermon manuscript. But there's a second language you speak from the pulpit, and that's the language of the speaker's feelings, his innermost emotions. A recent paperback offered this perceptive comment:

"These two simultaneous communications need not say the same thing. In fact, they may and often do say exactly opposite things, in which case the message of the words is not merely diminished by the contrary message of the feelings; it is actually canceled." (Stevenson and Diehl, *Reaching People from the Pulpit*, p.73.)

And so the rule must be in order not to mislead or confuse your hearer, be sure that in your sermon the language of the feelings supports the language of the mind.

What does my sermon say about the preacher? Does he come off as one who is impressed with himself? Does he seem to want people to recognize how clever or how fearless and uncompromising and loyal he is? Is he humble enough to admit his shortcomings, the difficulties he has with his old Adam, his need of the Savior? Is he ashamed to state his love for the Lord, his personal trust in the Savior?

What does my sermon say about my attitude toward the hearers? Do I talk down to them condescendingly? Do I seem to enjoy condemning their sin with the message of God's law? Are the "law portions" of my sermon usually more extensive than the "gospel portions?" Can my hearers detect a beating heart of sympathy with them in their difficult calling of living out the will of God in a world which doesn't know which end is up in life? Do I think of my hearers primarily as sons and daughters of the Most High, dearly loved by him and in fellowship with him, or do I view them primarily as supporters of an organization? Do I give the impression that I am more interested in the welfare of the congregation and its program than I am in people and in their progress in meeting God's goal for their lives?

It's absolutely essential that the preacher ask himself questions like these. When the sermon's intellectual message and its emotional message contradict one another, people instinctively choose the emotional message as the real one, and tend to disregard the intellectual message.

God give us the humility to suspect ourselves, the wisdom to view our homiletical work objectively, and the willingness to accept the help he offers, to enable us to be what he has called us to be—ambassadors for Christ!

Man's need/malady

1. separation from God (Is 53:6; 59:2)
2. enmity against God (Rm 8:7)
3. wrath of God (Eph 5:6)
4. death (Gn 2:7; Rm 6:23)
5. sin as rebellion (Ps 51:3)
6. sin as guilt (Mt 6:12)
7. sin as dominion (Rm 7:14f.20)
8. darkness (Col 1:13)
9. pangs of conscience (Ps 32:3, 51:8)

God's remedy

1. atonement (Rm 5:11; Eph 2:13)
2. reconciliation (2 Co 5:18f)
3. peace with God (Rm 5:1)
4. life (Rm 6:23; Jn 10:10)
5. Spirit at work (Rm 8:16)
6. forgiveness (Is 53:5)
7. release from sin's power (Rm 6:14)
8. light (Jn 8:12)
9. joy (Ps 51:8.12)

10. filth of sin
11. meaninglessness

(Rm 1:21ff)
(Ecclesiastes)

10. cleansing (1 Jn 1:7)
11. valid goal for life (Mt 6:33; 1 Co 10:31)