

## HOMILETICS : "THE STATE OF THE ART"

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Emerging from the entertainment world in the 1950's Malcolm Boyd became an Episcopal clergyman. Known as the "espresso priest" he was frequently found on a stool under a spotlight in a nightclub saying things like, "The pulpit is obsolete." There were hosts of others, some brighter, most not as colorful, who shared his point of view. It was a point of view that had been gathering momentum for decades.

That mood has changed. Today the pulpit is seen to be of fundamental importance in the life of the church. The "art of preaching" is regaining its credibility. The first two questions asked by most pastor-parish relations committees are: (1) "Can he/she preach?" and (2) "Does he/she love people?" Significantly, the "grass roots church" is being joined by academicians, ecclesiastics and secular critics as it cites these priorities.

Our understanding of "communicating the gospel through preaching" is broadening. There was a time when teachers of preachers tended to be big-name "pulpit masters" like Harry Emerson Fosdick, Paul Scherer, George Buttrick and Ralph Sockman. They were brilliant practitioners of the art. Today, without minimizing the importance of the "pulpiteer," there is a recognition that homiletics is a multi-faceted discipline. It involves biblical scholarship, liturgical faithfulness, the arts and an assortment of related fields.

What is the current state of the art? What are some of the emerging trends that account for a new awareness of preaching's singular place in the community of faith?

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There is a growing emphasis on exegesis and the new hermeneutics.

Some fifteen years ago David Randolph, who had taught Homiletics at Drew, wrote **The Renewal of Preaching**. (Today Randolph is pastor of Christ Church [UMC] in New York City, once served by Ralph Sockman and Harold Bosley, and team-teaches with James Forbes at Union Theological Seminary.) Referring to the seminal work of Gerhard Ebeling and Wilhelm Dilthey, Randolph insisted that the new hermeneutic was a key to the rebirth of preaching by "imparting a new understanding of reality, one that champions preaching as a way to interpret the gospel so that it is addressed to (the) contemporary (scene)."<sup>1</sup> Hermeneutics is not a retreat into biblical obscurantism. Russell Pregeant notes that "a hermeneutical method that reveals the text's relationship to its own present and past, but ignores its thrust toward the future, violates the text's very nature to the extent that it implies that the true meaning of the work is thereby exhausted."<sup>2</sup>

Leander Keck, a New Testament scholar, now Dean of Yale Divinity School, wrote his influential **The Bible and the Pulpit**<sup>3</sup> just eight years ago. Fred Craddock, considered by many the most influential homiletician among us (his newly published **Preaching**<sup>4</sup> will doubtless become a widely used textbook on the subject) is a New Testament scholar. There is a growing realization that authentic preaching must be faithful to its biblical roots, rely on biblical scholarship, be open to careful research and analysis; that it must be committed to reaching into a sacred past for the sake of the here and now and an unfolding future.

One expression of this biblical emphasis is the use of the lectionary. Among the "hand-outs" I have shared with my introductory class are Don S. Armentrout's "Aids for Preaching the New Three-Year Lectionary" and Ernie Campbell's brief item on "Liturgical Fundamentalism," taken from his **Notebook**, stressing the importance of biblical preaching, but asking "Why should a pastor, even for a good reason, find herself shut up to a narrow selection of prescribed passages as she prepares to preach?" Many professors of preaching are urging their students to follow the lectionary through the first three years of

their preaching. This will expose them to the full sweep of the biblical account. Then they will be better equipped to choose a course to follow.

There is also a renewed emphasis on an adequate theology of preaching and the preaching of theology.

In 1936, C.H. Dodd insisted that the "kerygma" provides the unifying theme for the New Testament revelation and that, therefore, preaching should be a continuing and urgent proclamation of the kerygma. Most homileticians in America felt this focus was far too narrow. With the passage of time it has gained wider and wider acceptance.

In 1973, Ronald Sleeth delivered a series of lectures at Perkins School of Theology. They appeared in the *Perkins Journal* in 1977 and will comprise a major thread running through his book on preaching to be published posthumously next year. Dr. Sleeth wrote, "The heart of the preacher's task is theological. . . . and the persistence of preaching and the survival of the Church are inextricably tied together."<sup>5</sup> He argued that preaching "rests on the doctrine of Revelation" and that the Word of God, not as ink on paper but as God-in-history and God-in-Christ, stands at the heart of that Revelation.

Richard Lischer in his helpful little volume, *A Theology of Preaching*, insists that preaching must have a central, theological focus or else it is likely that the preacher will "move directly from text to sermon, (and) the sermon will be awash with unassimilated and unordered biblical assertions."<sup>6</sup>

William McElvaney, new professor of preaching at Perkins, opens his *Good News Is Bad News Is Good News* with the words: "If I were a pastor in the church today . . . I would be looking for ways to come to grips with liberation theology in relation to the local congregation."<sup>7</sup> Justo and Catherine Gonzalez, in their *Liberation Preaching*,<sup>8</sup> have joined the preacher's task with the lot of the powerless and oppressed, have reminded their readers that the church is called to be "in solidarity with the poor," and have brought the task of proclamation into the presence of world need.

Bible - theology - tradition. There appears to be a new appreciation for tradition, for history, in the homiletician's self-understanding.

The Old Testament reverberates with the claim, "Thus saith the Lord" Tradition. In the New Testament Jesus offers a fresh, redemptive framework of thought. "I say unto you," he says. "Verily, verily, I say unto you." Jesus spoke as one having exousia (authority). The authority of tradition, hopefully without the trappings of dogmatism or a return to the "imperial pulpit," is being reclaimed by much present-day preaching.

Augustine, the preacher, has been rediscovered. Theologian, philosopher, ecclesiastic and shaper of much of the discipline and order of the Western church, Augustine wrote the first formal text on homiletics. It is freely acknowledged that the baptized rhetoric of the bishop of Hippo was instrumental in the spread of his influence. John Chrysostom, "the golden mouthed," was Augustine's counterpart in the Eastern church. Zealous reformer that he was his early example has been linked with the "social gospel" and activism of more recent vintage (in spite of his virulent anti-Semitism). It was the power of Chrysostom's preaching, considered second to none in the history of Christendom, that explains his place in the sun.

Martin Luther and John Calvin launched their earnest protest and honed their profound thought from the pulpits of the Reformation.

Henry Ford was wrong. History is not "bunk." It has its lessons to teach and its resources to offer. Homiletics is proudly reviewing and claiming its past. And yet the homiletician knows that tradition dare not be etched in stone.

One of the most hopeful signs in the study of preaching today is an appreciation of the innovative and experimental; an emphasis on openness to new forms.

Charles Rice of Drew (Preaching Biblically)<sup>9</sup> and Eugene Lowry of St. Paul School of Theology (The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon As Narrative Art Form)<sup>10</sup> are two of the "new wave" voices. They, and others, insist upon the utilization of a wide variety of techniques and tools in communicating the gospel: drama, art, literature, dialogue,

film, story. "Story" has been the rage over recent years. It's not all that new. It is as old as the "recital theology" of the Old Testament. Yet, the emphasis on words as symbols, on "tensive language" and experiential exegesis, on the wondrous possibilities of imagination and poetic narrative, open windows to all sorts of possibilities.

This new openness has its critics. Sleeth, in his Perkins lectures, said, "Ignoring preaching and getting together Picasso, McLuhan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Paul Tillich and Gower Champion is no small task, but some are giving it a good try,"<sup>11</sup> Later in the lectures he would modify his critique. But last week (September 26) in the Iliff chapel we heard David Petersen in his installation address illustrate a masterful blend of the old and the new. Chagal's "David" was there before us and references were made to Hadyn's "Creation" and other master-works of music, to Rembrandt and Michelangelo, to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (of Sherlock Holmes fame) and most refreshingly to Joseph Hiller's impious **God Knows**. Beautiful!

The horizons of the pulpit are expanding, and with the new breadth comes a new appreciation of possibilities.

In the light of all of the above I am convinced that one of the most important contributions the pulpit has to make to the church is that of bridge-builder and integrator of truth.

The gathered congregation at worship provides the core experience of the Christian community. In the Protestant tradition the sermon is the central event in that experience. There have been those who have viewed the sermon as an end in itself; as a work of art apart from its context. However, a contextual, dialectic role for the sermon is now being celebrated. It is seen as an opportunity for the preacher to stand in the midst of the people of God with arms outstretched, drawing together the disciplines and "sciences" of theological education: doctrine, history, psychology, the philosophy of religion, sociology, ecumenics, inter-cultural realities and ethics--all as a part of a total and faithful liturgical event. There is also an acknowledged need and determined effort to relate to other disciplines: medicine, law, political science, international relations, literature and

theatre. The pulpit, blended with imaginative approaches to Christian education and spiritual formation, is in a unique position to bring the strands of human thought and experience together and to define a wholistic understanding of the human situation.

As important as anything else, however, in the recovery of an appreciation for preaching in the life of the church, is an acceptance and affirmation of the personhood of the preacher. No longer can the professional role and the personal reality of the clergy be separated.

It is here that women in ministry may have their most significant contribution to make. (Their other contributions are notable; e.g., Elizabeth Achtemeier in Old Testament and Rosemary Reuther in theology/ethics.) It is here that women in ministry may flesh out their stereotypical image. They do, as a rule, tend to be sensitive, caring, understanding, supportive, vulnerable--warmly human. And these are the attributes of a good shepherd.

The questions again: (1) Can he/she preach? and (2) Does he/she love people? The questions are inseparable. In his 1928 **Harpers** article, "What Is The Matter With Preaching?" Fosdick insisted that the pulpit must respond to human need and real life situations or it becomes irrelevant. Unless the preacher embraces his/her own humanity it will be almost impossible to relate preaching to reality.

Marshall McLuhan reduced post-Reformation religion to an assortment of bleak images: the Gutenberg Bible and printing press, black robes, detached verbiage and impersonal oratory. He missed the point entirely. Phillips Brooks' definition of preaching has not been improved upon. It is the communication of truth through personality. It is the person of the preacher, the authentic vulnerable human being standing in the pulpit, who can relate to the people of his/her congregation and larger community. It is the person of the preacher who can share the struggle and the quest, who can identify as "wounded healer" with the sea of mortality everywhere about, and who can personify a relational, incarnational theology of the Word. To strip away the pretense and posturing of professionalism and be who we are may be one of the most valuable contributions being made to a positive reconsideration of Christian preaching in today's world.

1. David Randolph, **The Renewal of Preaching** (Fortress Press, 1969) p. 24.
2. Russel Pregeant, **Christology Beyond Dogma** (Fortress Press, 1979) p. 15.
3. Leander Keck, **The Bible and the Pulpit** (Abingdon, 1978).
4. Fred B. Craddock, **Preaching** (Abingdon, 1985).
5. Ronald Sleeth, "The Preacher Under Siege," **Perkins Journal** Summer 1977, p. 14.
6. Richard Lischer, **A Theology of Preaching** (Abingdon, 1981).
7. William K. McElvaney, **Good News Is Bad News Is Good News** (Orbis Books, 1980) p. x.
8. Justo L. and Catherine G. Gonzalez, **Liberation Preaching** (Abingdon, 1980).
9. Charles Rice, "Shaping Sermons to the Interplay of Text and Metaphor," **Preaching Biblically**, edited by Don M. Wardlow, (Westminster, 1983).
10. Eugene L. Lowry, **The Homiletical Plot** (John Knox Press, 1980).
11. Ronald Sleeth, **Op.Cit.**, p. 8.

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