Teaching the Bible through preaching

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Inundated as we are in this postmodern time with multiple worldviews and information about every topic under the sun, it is ironic that opportunities for teaching the Bible are less frequent than ever before. Gone are our winter Bible schools and Bible conferences. Gone too, in many congregations, are weekly evening Bible studies. And the Sunday morning adult study time often attracts only a remnant of elderly faithful. The twenty-minute Sunday morning sermon is often the only recourse left to the pastor for teaching the Bible.

We may find easy connecting points with this word from God, we may be confused and want to know more; we may even take offence—but biblical preaching will always facilitate an encounter between the listener and God.

Preachers know well the burden of expectation laid on that paltry twenty minutes. On top of all the other things a sermon must say and do, can it also be an effective vehicle to teach the Bible? I believe it can and must, at two levels. At the first level, careful biblical preaching will include significant teaching of the Bible. Here the teaching will provide listeners with the necessary biblical background to grasp the sermon. Second, at a deeper level, teaching the Bible in preaching can be overt and intentional, done for its own sake, through and around the edges of the sermon. The interest now becomes looking at the bigger picture of the Bible, its function and ongoing significance, not just conveying the preparatory knowledge needed to take in the morning's sermon.

But first, should the sermon be a vehicle for teaching?

Should a sermon teach?

A common assumption is that the objectives of preaching and teaching are not compatible. Teaching, some say, belongs to

lectures, the dissemination of facts and the investigations of the classroom. Some years ago the prolific New Testament scholar Reginald H. Fuller articulated a commonly held bias. "The pulpit," he advised, "is not the time and place to teach biblical criticism as such, either in its methods or in its results. In fact, teaching of whatever kind is out of place in the pulpit. This goes equally for those who say they like to preach what they call 'teaching sermons.' . . . The place for teaching is in the lay class."[1] And yet Fuller goes on to note with amazement that for lay people in the classroom, critical insights in Bible learning result in real liberation. Surely life-changing liberation should be one of the primary objectives of preaching, too!

Indeed, too much can be made of the difference between the purpose of teaching the Bible in the church classroom and what we hope to achieve in preaching. Effective Bible teaching in the classroom will inspire and motivate us and do much more than just challenge us intellectually. Likewise, good preaching will not only move us but also stimulate our thinking. Good biblical teaching, whether it happens in the weekday church classroom or from the Sunday morning pulpit, will not settle for an easy dichotomy between the intellectual and the affective, the inspirational and the informative, the ethical and the spiritual. Preaching that has a solid biblical foundation will by its nature include a teaching component.

What makes preaching biblical?

Preachers can teach the Bible through biblical preaching. Not all preaching must be biblical preaching—although few preachers would want to be known for their nonbiblical preaching![2] But what makes preaching biblical? Repeated references to the Bible don't necessarily produce a biblical sermon. As Thomas Long puts it: "Preaching cannot claim to be biblical simply because it gums together a lot of biblical quotes, like peanuts in a Snickers bar."[3] Is a sermon biblical when it uses proof texting to support a position contrary to the spirit of the Bible? How about a sermon that begins and ends with an image or theological thought from a biblical text but only uses it in service of the preacher's own imagination? Can a sermon be biblical without any reference to a biblical text? Is the parishioner's commendation of "biblical

preaching" anything more than a seal of approval for theology "done my way"?

How can we describe biblical preaching? I find the following five criteria useful.

Biblical preaching, first and foremost, will put us in conversation with the Bible, and through the Bible, with God. When we move from text to sermon, we may sometimes find easy connecting points with this word from God and ready answers to our questions; we may sometimes be confused and want to know more; we may even take offence at the words placed in God's mouth—but biblical preaching will always facilitate an encounter between the listener and God.

Biblical preaching will keep scripture central and pervasive throughout the sermon. When the text is peripheral to what the sermon says and does, the preaching may be good or even excellent, but perhaps it should not be classified as biblical preaching. Richard White suggests that scripture should be central in the sermon, not merely in the study. It should be central for the congregation, not merely for the professional person delivering the sermon. It should be used extensively and repeatedly, not merely as a springboard. And it should have its own legitimate setting in time and place, not merely in the abstract.[4]

Biblical preaching pays attention to content and form; it seeks to understand what the biblical text does and then to replicate it in the sermon. Preaching, says Leander Keck, "is truly biblical when (a) the Bible governs the content of the sermon and when (b) the function of the sermon is analogous to that of the text. In other words, preaching is biblical when it imparts a Bible-shaped word in a Bible-like way."[5] Revelation 7:9–17, for example, affects us differently than does Romans 5:1–10, and sermons on those texts should follow the lead of what the text does to us. The biblical text should shape the content and the purpose of the sermon.

Biblical preaching will invoke and wrestle with the authority of the scripture. A sermon may appeal to many sources of knowledge and wisdom: to sociological, political and psychological studies; to popular and sophisticated theological constructs; to all manner of ancient and contemporary literary and artistic expression. In the end, however, what makes a sermon biblical is the

pre-eminent place given to scripture. A biblical sermon will exert the claim of scripture on our lives.

Biblical preaching is not limited to any one genre of preaching, but the Bible—not the genre—must guide the sermon for it to be biblical. Biblical preaching has often been propositional and discursive in nature, but there have always been other creative ways of encountering God through the written and spoken word. Other homiletical strategies, as proposed in our time by Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, and David Buttrick, for example, also lend themselves to effective biblical preaching.[6] Whatever the homiletical strategy, if a sermon is to be classified as biblical preaching, the homiletical form must be subservient to the centrality of scripture.

Teaching through and around the edges of the sermon

Preachers can no longer assume that their congregations are biblically literate, even at the most basic level. Each Sunday morning we face the challenge of determining how much factual and contextual background information our congregation needs in order to appreciate the essence of the sermon. Some teaching is essential if listeners are to understand the proclamation. But instead of seeing biblical teaching as peripheral, as a prelude or by-product to be set aside as quickly as possible, we should cherish this opportunity, limited as it is, to teach the Bible intentionally in the centre and along the margins of the sermon.

Let us err on the side of dwelling too long with the scripture rather than on allowing the mindset of the twenty-first century, dominated by materialism and the entertainment industry, to supplant the Bible's counterculture challenge and vision. Over the course of the years, simply by taking time to provide good biblical background and context, we can introduce our congregations to much basic Bible knowledge. This introduction will be even more effective if our selection of scripture is somewhat systematic.

At a deeper level, beyond offering the basic factual knowledge needed to understand the particular sermon of the Sunday morning, teaching through preaching can do much to develop a congregation's awareness of the bigger picture of the Bible. The following dimensions are among those that warrant special attention:

The formation of the Bible and how the Bible functions. An understanding of the formation and function of the Bible will help our listeners see how God is at work in scripture. The Bible comes to us through a lengthy, complicated, Spirit-guided process, in which human communities play a vital role. God's living word is hammered out in the ambiguities of the human matrix. The Bible is a record of fluid theological reflections on encounters with God, which are in conversation with one another. Our listeners can more fruitfully engage the message of the Bible if they understand that we find within it different voices, sometimes complementing one another, sometimes building one on the other, sometimes gently reinterpreting the other, each with a particular theological persuasion and a particular purpose in mind.

I offer two examples of how teaching and preaching interact on this point. A provocative sermon can be built around the abrupt ending of Mark's Gospel (Mark 16:8), and the later endings added by subsequent scribes. The teaching questions, which give some understanding of the formation of the Gospels, climax in questions about the function of the text: What does it want us to do? What is the original ending of Mark's Gospel? What might Mark's intent be in ending so abruptly? Why did the early church scribes need to supply alternative endings? What does the abrupt ending of the Gospel want the listener/reader to do?[7] As the preacher draws the listener into participating in Mark's gospel drama, the sermon provides an opportunity for some significant teaching about the formation and function of the Bible.

An understanding of the formation and function of the Bible will help our listeners see how God is at work in scripture. The Bible comes to us through a lengthy, complicated, Spirit-guided process, in which human communities play a vital role.

John's Gospel tells of the disciples gathered behind shuttered doors because of their "fear of the Jews" (20:19). Earlier the Gospel has indicated that this fear was motivated by the Jewish practice of the day of putting out of the synagogue those who confessed Jesus as the Christ (9:22, 12:42). Historical-critical methods help us to recognize that this practice and fear belong not to the time of crucifixion but to the era in which the Gospel of John was edited. The insight for preaching comes in reflecting on how the fear of the disciples has

been "updated" as the gospel story is told in the different stages of development. Whether the fear is in the context of the crucifixion, somewhere in the process of oral tradition, in the time of the final editing of the Gospel, or in the particular era in which it is heard, disciples are tempted to lock themselves behind shuttered doors. And no matter what the fear, Jesus passes through the closed doors. The Gospel writer gives us permission—in fact, strongly invites us—to "update" the fears that cause us to bar our doors. And even now the risen Christ passes through locked doors to be in our midst.

The Bible is a living word. Awareness of the formation and nature of the Bible can help those who hear our sermons understand its relevance more deeply.

The worldviews of the Bible. The Bible took shape in the context of not one but a variety of worldviews, all of them different from our own. A worldview consists of the framework of ideas and beliefs from which one sees and interprets reality. We can easily miss the intent of scripture in preaching—or worse, do an injustice to the Bible—if we fail to clarify how the worldview of the text differs from ours. God's activity is described within the confines of a particular worldview. In our haste to move from scripture to sermon, the clarity of the word can be lost in translation if we naively assume that our worldview and the biblical worldview are homogeneous. What new insights come to our listeners in preaching on Luke's ascension narrative, for example, when we unpack the worldview of the biblical writer? To our advantage, the postmodern listener easily recognizes the multiplicity of worldviews. Teaching about the biblical worldviews and juxtaposing them with our own can add a provocative dimension to our biblical preaching.

The Bible as a whole and its canonical salvation story. Our listeners' knowledge of the Bible is often fragmented and disconnected. In order to see the big picture of the Bible, listeners need to gain an appreciation for the biblical canon. That will not happen without intentional teaching.

While the Bible contains many voices, they come together to form one story about God's dream for the world. Can our listeners link the New Testament to the Old in a way that honours a Jewish reading of the Old Testament? Can they wisely connect the

anticipation of the prophet Isaiah to the seer of the Book of Revelation? Beneath the diversity within scripture is a unity of thought and purpose. Preachers in this postmodern time need to look for occasions to teach the canonical message of the Bible.

The canonical perspective gives balance and breadth to a sermon. Luke's account of the Pentecost events after Jesus' resurrection and ascension (Acts 2:1–21) is a regular lectionary text for Pentecost Sunday. But the biblical description of the work of the Spirit is so much bigger than Luke's Pentecost account. How does Luke's perspective fit into the broader picture? How does the broader picture temper or complement Luke's description? How can our listeners benefit from hearing about the unity and diversity of the canon on this topic?

The Bible's claim to authority. Underlying all our teaching, whether in the classroom or from the pulpit, is a question of biblical authority. Why should we care about what the Bible says? That question is the elephant in the sanctuary whenever we use air time to teach the Bible. What does it mean to refer to the Bible as the word of God? Why give authority to our scripture above other holy writings, or for that matter, above contemporary wisdom? Preaching today requires that we make the case for the authority of scripture as it contends with a host of other claimants. Assumptions and dogmatic statements will no longer suffice. To undergird preaching in our time, it is essential that we provide some careful and concise teaching on this question.

Effective biblical preaching cannot happen apart from teaching. Valuable learning about the Bible also happens if the preacher is intentional about developing the bigger picture of the Bible.

Conclusion

Teaching the Bible in preaching is part of good biblical preaching. Effective biblical preaching cannot happen apart from teaching. Valuable learning about the Bible also happens if the preacher is intentional about developing the bigger picture through and around the edges of the sermon. When listeners are able to see the big picture of the Bible, they are better able to identify and connect with God's will and way as revealed in scripture.

Among all the things that the sermon must do, one of the most important is the holy task of teaching the Bible.

Notes

[1] Reginald H. Fuller, *The Use of the Bible in Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 70.
[2] But see Edward Farley, "Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel," in A *Reader on Preaching: Making Connections*, ed. David Day, Jeff Astley, and Leslie J. Francis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 65–74: Farley suggests that the sermon should first and foremost preach the gospel and then maybe the scripture.
[3] Thomas G. Long, "The Distance We Have Travelled: Changing Trends in Preaching," in *A Reader on Preaching,* ed. Day et al., 12.
[4] Richard C. White, *Biblical Preaching: How to Find and Remove the Barriers* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1988), 11.
[5] Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1978), 106.
[6] See, for example, Raymond D. Bystrom, *Preaching Biblical Sermons: Three Contemporary Strategies* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Books, 2006).
[7] See, for example, Brian Blount and Gary Charles, "Happily Ever After: Mark 16:1–8," *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 256–73.

About the author

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