Persevering in a priority

Ron Kennel

With confidence I can report that teaching and preaching the Bible was a priority throughout my thirty-five years in full-time pastoral ministry. The roots for this concern go deep.

Roots

Nurtured in the Anabaptist faith tradition and its institutions, I internalized the centrality of the Bible for the church and Christian life.

One of my earliest memories as a child is snuggling beside Mom and Dad on the sofa as they read Bible stories expressively and enthusiastically. I was captivated. My parents were transmitting the values and beliefs in the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith tradition shared by their rural Mennonite congregation where the Bible was studied in Sunday school and summer Bible school, preached in worship, and memorized. I once told my Bible school teachers that I wished we had nine months of Bible school and two weeks of regular school.

What I offer here is not a success story or a comprehensive method but something of a case study with reflections. I share it in hopes that it may stimulate and encourage better perspectives on and approaches to preaching the Bible.

My inner call to preach and teach the Bible began to emerge in early adolescence. I began to identify with preachers. I took notes during sermons and daydreamed of preaching.

At Hesston (KS) College and Goshen (IN) College and at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS; Elkhart, IN), the lights came on for me in classes with Clayton Beyler, Howard Charles, Jake Enz, William Klassen, Millard Lind, and Willard Swartley. In the words of Luke 24, my heart burned within me as they opened the scriptures. I grew in my understanding and appreciation of the Bible, was spiritually nourished and motivated to pass on what I had received.

So I left seminary for the pastorate with a clear sense of being a servant of the word. It's an identity that has remained. Expounding the scriptures was and is life for me.

Methods

But when it comes to writing about how I worked with the Bible in the pastorate, I have more caution, for several reasons. During my two pastorates, I gave little attention to results of my preaching and teaching. I gave little attention to balance in my coverage and methods. I tended to preach and teach more from the New Testament than the Old. With the exception of Advent and Lent in later years, I did not follow the lectionary. In my second pastorate, I offered to use it, but the elders declined and told me to preach to people's needs. In earlier years, I struck out on my own in determining the preaching and teaching menu. In later years, I made proposals to the elders who usually rubber-stamped them. And I had some difficulty in communicating. So what I offer here is not a success story or a comprehensive method but something of a case study with reflections. I share it in hopes that it may stimulate and encourage better perspectives and approaches.

In preaching, my sermons alternated between two main types: expository and topical.

A large number of my expository sermons took the congregation through entire books of the Bible or sections of books (Genesis 1–11; selected psalms, Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, Ephesians, Philippians), selected because of needs I saw in the congregation.

For topical sermons I selected themes based on congregational goals and needs, as well as crises in the larger world. Most of my topical sermons were biblical-theological surveys.

My sermons also included a third type: salvation history sermons. Seventeen times during my second pastorate, on the first Sunday of January I preached a review of the highlights of the entire story of salvation from creation to consummation (including highlights of church history). In sermons on later Sundays in January, I spelled out how stories of my people fit into God's great story, to enhance their sense of identity. I also wanted the congregation to see the Bible's bigger picture and to recognize it as a source of identity and meaning.

The small group Bible studies I led were usually during summer Bible school, on Wednesday evenings, and in Sunday school classes. In my second pastorate, I led a Wednesday evening group for several months each fall in studies in the Old Testament. In sixteen years, we covered Genesis 1 through 1 Samuel 18. Sometimes as I led these studies, I saw myself as a trail guide taking God's people on a hike through the scriptures.

I wanted more than anything to help people gain access to the Bible, regardless of their knowledge and skill. For this reason I focused on understanding the message intended by the biblical authors.

I supplemented sermons and Bible studies with dramas, visual aids, and handouts (charts, booklets, diagrams, and outlines of points with citations of biblical references).

Although I used various forms of biblical criticism as tools in my own study, I avoided making these explicit, except where I felt they might be helpful to people in understanding difficult texts. Sometimes I defined Hebrew and Greek words. In doing so, I risked sending an unintended message that the Bible is accessible only to experts. I wanted more than anything to help people gain access to the Bible, regardless of their knowledge and skill. For this reason I avoided technical jargon. I gave little attention to critical questions of historicity and instead focused on understanding the message intended by the biblical authors.

My desire was that the people I served come to view the Bible not as a problem to be solved but as an accessible medium through which to hear God's word. I felt the urgency of exposing people to the Bible on Sunday mornings, because I sensed that it was the only time during the week that many heard or read it. As one young adult once said to me, "You want us to read our Bibles during the week. Well, I don't!" I encouraged folks to notice emotions, dilemmas, and conflicts in biblical stories, and to look for how these might parallel experiences in their own lives. I shared my enthusiasm and passion. I wanted to put an end to dry Bible study. My hope was to help people see the Bible as the living, breathing book I found it to be, and by the power of the Spirit, to hear God's word and grow in Christ.

Responses

Did the Bible live for these people? While I preached and taught I

seldom saw anyone sleeping. I heard positive responses but often in generalities: "A good sermon." "We really enjoy your teaching." "This really spoke to me." Some carefully saved my handouts. Some were willing to take an honest look at difficult texts and wrestle with tensions in them. One brother told me that Leviticus came alive for him when we studied it in Wednesday evening classes. Regular pastoral evaluations indicated that the majority were positive about my work with the Bible.

This generally positive response outweighed the resistances and negative reactions. Unfortunately, memories of the negative tend to loom larger than they ought to.

Not long after I began my first pastorate, I remember my disappointment when only the faithful few showed up for Wednesday evening Bible studies, after I had spent hours preparing. Sometimes I would stand at a window in the sanctuary and look out, hoping to see a few more cars that never drove in.

Some comments revealed that I was not connecting well with everyone. A sister once reminded me, "Ron, you've got to remember that we are common people." One of my friends said, "I don't care about history and the Greek. I just want a challenge for today." Another told me that "when you go back to the Gospel of Matthew, I just lose interest." After I preached on the ascension of Jesus, one person told me, "I got nothing out of your sermon this morning." Such comments were hard to take. They pointed out my flaws, but I tried to redefine this response positively and see it as an opportunity to grow and improve.

Late in my second pastorate I found some help in Tex Sample's insights in *Ministry in an Oral Culture*.[1] Sample identifies cultural differences as a significant factor in ministry. He describes a polarity between literate and traditional/oral cultures in the U.S., and he documents ways people of these two cultures think and function differently. Oral people tend to think in terms of relationships and feelings, whereas literate people tend to think in terms of theory and propositions. Oral people understand tacitly; they know without words, whereas literate people understand explicitly with descriptive words. Oral people tend to operate in the concrete and practical and see theory as much ado about nothing, whereas literate people are more introspective and impressed with ideas, logic, and theory. Oral people learn from

stories, proverbs, and relationships, whereas literate people learn from books and discourse. In ethical matters, literate people tend to be tolerant of ambiguities and to think in both-ands, whereas oral people are less tolerant of ambiguities and tend to think in either-ors. Oral people mistrust the experts that literate people respect. Oral people are turned off by big words and unimpressed by the latest ideas coming out of seminary. In Sample's view, both cultures have validity, but people of one culture tend to view those of the other negatively.

Sample's perspectives made sense to me. They illuminated my intercultural setting. Although my roots are in a traditional/oral culture, I am of the literate culture but attempting to minister to those who are more traditional/oral. They had less formal education than I, and most had not attended college. Some had not attended high school.

Sample's insights confirmed for me the power of culture, my own and that of my congregation. It's a principality and power, a primary shaper of ecclesiology, hermeneutics, ethics, and politics.

Sample points to some obvious implications for ministry by literate people in traditional/oral settings: respect and be sensitive to the oral culture and adapt and accommodate; make more use of story; attend to relationships; connect with the concrete; tread lightly on the theoretical; and by all means, avoid big words. This approach is consistent with the mind of Christ, who gave up a position of power to stand beside—rather than over—people as a fellow human being and a servant (Phil. 2:5–8).

Some principles for ministry by literate people in traditional/oral settings: respect oral culture; make more use of story; attend to relationships; connect with the concrete; tread lightly on the theoretical.

Looking back on my teaching and preaching methods, I take heart that to some degree I was building intercultural bridges without being aware it. But after I read Sample's book, it seemed like I only felt pressure to improve. I found this work difficult. After carefully and prayerfully preparing for what I saw as divine appointments in preaching and teaching, I wondered how could I improve any more.

As I was closing out my second pastorate, I felt dissatisfied about what seemed to be a lack of success in bridging the

intercultural gap. But far more important to me than comments and reactions was whether people had heard and heeded God's word as a result of my work. Were they transformed? Were they more equipped for every good work, as Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16? I have no data. But as I look back over the years and years of sermons and Bible studies, I see a massive effort in which I gave my best.

Persevering

After hearing a bit of my story of working with the Bible in the congregation, a friend asked me recently, "What kept you going?"

My first answer is that it was only by the power of the same Spirit who inspired the scriptures that I kept going. I believe that the Holy Spirit gave me my hunger for the Bible, gifts to teach and preach, energy, and inspiration.

But I also believe that the Holy Spirit works in partnership with me. Fundamental to my part is prayer. I knew people in the congregation were praying for me, but it seemed imperative to keep working on my own relationship with God in prayer, spiritual direction, retreats, and reading the Bible not for study but for hearing God's word to me. In my stronger moments, I would visualize Jesus walking beside me to the pulpit. I have no doubt that God is able to speak without my help, but I prefer to function in such a way that God might work through me rather than in spite of me. I seriously doubt that I am able to do this unless I myself am seeking God.

Second, scripture itself kept me going. As I prepared and taught, I found myself on an adventure with God. To this day, the scripture illuminates and nourishes me. It deepens my identity as one of God's people. As I "eat the scroll," internalizing the written word, I am able to transmit not just from my head but also from my heart and from my whole self.

Third, my trust in God to work as promised in the Bible kept me going. God's word will not return empty but will accomplish the purpose for which God sent it (Isa. 55:10–11; Matt. 13:1–43; Mark 4:1–32; Luke 8:4–15; 1 Cor. 3:5–9). This promise is no excuse for sloppy work. Instead it encouraged me to give my best in teaching and preaching, and to let up to God and others the responsibility for transformation. It directed me to be patient, to

take the long look, and to accept the possibility that I may not see the future harvest from my ministry. It helped me to be less troubled when my teaching met resistance or when only a small group showed up for Bible study. It gave me confidence that the seed and the leaven of the Word grows, often inconspicuously, and that a step of transformation in one person affects the congregation, which is a relational system.

Fourth, my relationship with the congregations I served kept me going. Even though they did not always agree with me, I sensed that they loved me. They prayed for me, came to hear me, and affirmed me. Correspondingly, I loved them. I did my best to be there for them during crises. In my extensive preparations, I communicated to them my high regard for them. If small groups showed up, I tried to serve them as if they had been a large crowd. I sought to stand beside them rather than over them. I revealed some of my own struggles. When we would encounter a difficult biblical text, I admitted my uncertainties. One sister told me that by revealing my vulnerability, I gave permission to the congregation to be vulnerable.

I would visualize Jesus walking beside me to the pulpit. I have no doubt that God is able to speak without my help, but I prefer to function in such a way that God might work through me rather than in spite of me.

Fifth, the larger church kept me going. During both pastorates I was blessed with supportive collegial relationships with other pastors, both Mennonite and other than Mennonite. I took advantage of continuing education opportunities. An important one was the annual AMBS Pastors Week. When beginning a series on one of the books in the Bible, I would call seminary professors and ask for recommendations about the best commentaries. My inquiries were always well received.

Sixth, a deep sense of call kept me going. The roots of this call run deep. Preaching and teaching the scriptures are soul matters for me. Persevering in this ministry was living out of my identity. Sometimes as I drove home from church after no one made a comment about my sermon, I would hear an inner voice saying, "You said the right things today."

Seventh, my dear wife kept me going. Judy patiently allowed me space and time for extensive preparations. She was my primary support in what I saw as the awesome responsibility of

opening God's word for the congregation from week to week. She listened to my proposals for sermons and gave me constructive counsel. She affirmed me and stood by me when I received feedback. She held me up in prayer. Her love was the face of Jesus.

Scripture nourishes me. As I "eat the scroll," internalizing the written word, I am able to transmit not from my head only but also from my heart and from my whole self.

Although persevering in the priority of teaching and preaching the Bible during my years in the pastorate required my effort, I know that it happened only by the mercy of God. For this I cannot thank God enough. And that's why at this juncture I can still take refuge in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15: "Therefore my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain."

Note

[1] Tex Sample, *Ministry in an Oral Culture: Living with Will Rogers, Uncle Remus, and Minnie Pearl* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

About the author

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