Tapping the potential of biblical preaching

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On January 1, 1519, Ulrich Zwingli startled his congregation at the Grossmünster in Zurich, Switzerland, by announcing that he would not be reading from the prescribed text for the day but would instead begin preaching sermons on the Gospel of Matthew. He proceeded to read from the Greek text of the Gospel. Beginning with the first verse, he translated the text, explaining it and applying it as he went along. One excited listener, Thomas Platter, said it felt as if he were being pulled up by the hair of his head. Each Sunday Zwingli began his sermon at the point in the Gospel where he had left off the previous Sunday, and when he finished Matthew, he went on to the Acts of the Apostles, the New Testament epistles, and the Old Testament. His preaching, based on biblical exegesis, sparked the Reformation in Switzerland and influenced the Anabaptist commitment to biblical preaching.

Zwingli's preaching influenced the Anabaptist commitment to biblical preaching. But has his approach become a straitjacket for us? Could we benefit from widening our vision of biblical preaching?

Yet I wonder, has Zwingli's approach become a straitjacket for us? I preach most Sundays, so I rarely hear my Mennonite colleagues' sermons, but those I do hear tend to follow Zwingli's pattern: after a portion of scripture is read, the preacher interprets and applies the text. I am glad that Mennonite preaching continues to be biblical, solidly anchored in specific scriptures. But we could perhaps benefit from widening our vision of biblical preaching. Expanding our practice could help us more effectively tap into the transforming power of scripture.

In what follows we will consider four approaches to biblical preaching: exegetical preaching, doctrinal preaching, rhetorical form preaching, and topical preaching.

Exegetical preaching

The most straightforward approach to biblical preaching is exegesis. We begin with a scriptural text: a lectionary passage for that Sunday or a story or pericope of our choosing. Like Zwingli, we may work through a book of the Bible one passage at a time. The sermon addresses two basic interpretive questions: What did the text mean to its original writer/hearers, and what does it mean for us today? The first question we answer through careful exegesis, aided by scholarly commentaries, and the second question we answer through our ability to find parallels between the original biblical context and ours.

Although we may dress up this approach with additional frills, most Mennonite preachers—myself included—use it. We explain the text and then apply it. The obvious strength of this approach is that the biblical passage is central to the sermon; at best, the congregation hears a carefully researched and thoughtful exploration of the past and present meaning of a portion of the Bible. Amid a famine in biblical literacy in our culture, the exegetical preacher feeds his congregation's Bible knowledge.

But the exegetical approach to preaching has deficiencies and hazards. Some listeners complain that it is boring. Especially when the sermon is a biblical lecture, a few in the congregation will thrive on hearing scholarly analysis and systematic explanation, but many will not. Those who think in pictures or stories are likely to feel left out. Those without a strong interest in biblical history will likewise be unmoved. In addition, exegetical preachers face the challenge of communicating with people whose levels of biblical knowledge differ. If we assume too much biblical literacy or deal in sophisticated concepts, children and newer believers may not understand; if we dumb down the message, we will fail to engage those who know the Bible well.

Another problem is that exegetical preaching often breaks the story and message of the Bible down into unrelated tiny pieces. Typically, a sermon is based on a pericope of about a dozen verses. But how can one understand or appreciate the biblical message in one twelve-verse unit at a time? We break up books of the Bible into so many pieces (and if we follow the lectionary, jumble the order), no one can follow the flow or overall purpose of the book's author. Complicating the situation is the claim many homileticians

make that every sermon must be a presentation of the Christian good news—but not every pericope contains the good news. In fact, many do not. As a result, the preacher is forced either to preach a sermon that is a woefully incomplete gospel, or to violate the integrity of the pericope's meaning by going beyond (and sometimes against) what it actually says.

Despite these serious drawbacks, exegetical preaching on a biblical text isn't going to disappear—nor should it. Exegetical preaching is so basic an approach to biblical preaching that we dare not neglect it. But we can add features to exegetical preaching that can enhance its power to communicate with and transform the congregation.

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For instance, a sermon gains power if we articulate a contemporary problem or question that demands resolution. Exegetical preachers need to find a problem or question, inherent in the text, that is relevant to the congregation. If we begin the sermon with a story that helps illustrate that problem or question, listeners will be hooked. If we articulate the problem or question sharply enough, and it is relevant to their lives, they will want to pay attention to the exegesis of the biblical text in order to find the possible solution. Sustaining the tension as long as possible—by resisting the urge to reveal the solution too early—keeps people guessing, and they will devote more energy to listening.

Our exegetical preaching is also more powerful when we do not give in to the temptation to protect our congregations from the Bible. Preach about the passages that are difficult; include texts the Revised Common Lectionary has cut out. Dare to talk honestly about the final verses of otherwise beloved Psalms 137 and 139, for example. Allow the Bible to shock the congregation. Doesn't Jesus say in Luke 6:20–26 that the poor are entering God's kingdom, while the rich are going to be left out? Do not let the congregation off easy, but go with the text and struggle with it, and be honest about your own doubts or confusion.

Ask critical questions about what the biblical authors are saying. Is it true that birds don't need to worry, because their heavenly Father feeds them? Is it true that if anyone is in Christ,

there is a new creation? When we simply repeat biblical assertions without challenging them—especially those that are counter-intuitive or contrary to our observation—we reveal our fear of the truth, not our proclamation of truth.

Zwingli's exegetical preaching grabbed the attention of his congregation because he did not repeat from the pulpit what they had heard before. His preaching led him to condemn the lucrative practice of having Swiss men fight as mercenaries for foreign powers, and he dared overturn many cherished traditions of his church. For us, too, good exegetical preaching will avoid stating the obvious and simply reinforcing what everyone already thinks or claims to believe. Instead, we will interpret the Bible faithfully, to enable the congregation to see God's will and activity in a new light.

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Doctrinal preaching

Doctrinal preaching differs from exegetical preaching in that the preacher begins with a biblical concept or theme rather than with a particular passage as the focus of the sermon. The sermon may be about grace or forgiveness, faith or doubt, judgment or salvation, serving others or life after death. Or we may choose to preach a series of sermons based on a set of concepts found in a particular passage (see, for instance, Paul's list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, or the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5). The sermon is not an explanation of a single text. Rather, the preacher ranges throughout the Bible, to help the congregation better understand a biblical theme or concept.

A major advantage of this approach over the standard exegetical approach is that the Bible is not chopped into pieces, each chunk artificially carrying the entire weight of the preacher's message. Rather, we treat the Bible as a whole, seeing its story and development and multiple perspectives through an important and clarifying thematic lens. One might call this a canonical approach rather than a pericope approach to preaching. We treat the scripture as a canon of voices, each adding something different and important.

But doctrinal preaching shares a disadvantage of exegetical preaching: it often turns into a lecture—except now the lecture plods all over the Bible instead of confining itself to one manageable place! This drawback can be turned around, though, by using the problem/question technique suggested above. Few concepts or themes are static throughout the Bible. Instead, the Bible provides multiple—often contrary—perspectives on a theme. For instance, Deuteronomy and Job handle the problem of tragic suffering quite differently; the Psalms and the Sermon on the Mount adopt quite different attitudes toward enemies. These tensions pose a problem the preacher can solve or at least explore. The tension and desire for resolution hold listeners' interest.

Alternatively, instead of preaching on one biblical theme viewed in contrasting ways in the Bible, we can select two themes often considered contradictory—justice and mercy, for example—and explore how the Bible attempts to integrate these concepts. The apparent tension in the opposing themes makes the congregation hungry to hear a resolution.

A wonderful and sometimes scary byproduct of this approach is that a congregation engages the Bible with greater maturity, recognizing that God's self-revelation involves development, dialogue, and disputation, as well as possible contradictions. It is no accident that the Bible contains four Gospels rather than one neat synthesis. Contrasting perspectives are fundamental to biblical revelation. The congregation is thus invited into deeper reflection and openness in its spiritual life, and its understanding of what we mean by doctrine is challenged and transformed.

Rhetorical form preaching

Exegetical and doctrinal approaches to preaching are often analytical: the preacher attempts to persuade the congregation through a logical process of examining biblical texts, and the result is truths that can be stated in propositional form. This left brain approach appeals to certain listeners and discourages others. It tends to reduce faith to a thinking process and foster a rational, objective experience rather than a passionate, subjective one. But when we look at the biblical texts about which we are preaching, we discover a far greater range of rhetorical strategies. Why not preach the biblical texts in the way the texts themselves preach?

The Bible is a rich collection of many rhetorical forms. In its pages we see various ways of proclaiming the message about God: proverbs, dialogues, songs, history, philosophy, counseling, dreams, visions, and parables, to name only a few. Instead of imposing an analytical sermon on a text that may not be analytical, why not shape the sermon around the rhetorical form of the text? As Fred Craddock famously proposed: "Let doxologies be shared doxologically, narratives narratively, polemics polemically, poems poetically, and parables parabolically. In other words, biblical preaching ought to be biblical."[1]

According to this approach, the form of the text determines the form of the sermon. Is the text a story? Then the sermon should be a story. Don't analyze the biblical story, squeezing out some propositional truth or abstract idea while violating the text's own rhetorical form and strategy. Persuade the listener in the way the text persuades the listener—through a story! When we hear a joke, do we analyze it, or do we laugh at it? And after we laugh, we often respond with another joke, and the laughter continues. That's the best way to preach a joke. We misuse Jesus' parables if we turn them into analytical sermons. To preach about his parables, we should speak in new parables.[2]

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But if we follow this approach too literally, it breaks down. Does a sermon on a psalm need to be a song? Does a sermon on an epistle need to be an epistle? Does a sermon on a proverb need to be just a proverb? (That would be a short sermon!) An alternative is to mold one's sermon around the rhetorical purpose of the text, suggested by its rhetorical form.[3] Instead of insisting that the sermon have the same rhetorical *form* as the text, let the sermon move toward the same rhetorical *effect*. For instance, a sermon on Jesus' beatitudes should leave the congregation feeling blessed—given the reality of God's kingdom—amid their poverty and pain. A sermon on a psalm should lead naturally to our singing. A sermon on one of Paul's letters should offer Spirit-inspired counsel for resolving a current congregational conflict.[4]

Learning from and using the many rhetorical forms and strategies of the Bible can open the floodgates of creativity in our preaching, and our sermons may affect our listeners in ways similar to the ways the Bible itself speaks to us.

Topical preaching

Unlike exegetical and rhetorical form preaching, which begin with a particular text, and unlike doctrinal preaching, which begins with a biblical concept or theme, topical preaching begins with a contemporary issue that the congregation needs to address. But isn't this the very antithesis of biblical preaching? Yes—if the primary guidance for resolving the issue is one's own reason or personal experience or humanitarian concern. Such sermons use scripture as a veneer; the substance behind them isn't biblical. This kind of preaching is rightly maligned as "a sermon in search of a text." But topical preaching does not need to be biblically disconnected; in fact, one could argue that it has the potential to be the most biblical of all.

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Much of the preaching in the Bible is topical. The letter of James, for instance, is essentially a topical sermon. A few parts contain scripture quotations or brief exegesis of scripture—as in the discussion of whether Abraham's faith or his works made him right with God. But most of this sermon is focused on various concerns, and it answers those concerns with fresh pronouncements that echo biblical wisdom and Jesus' teachings. Or consider 1 John, a sermon-letter dealing with a problem: those claiming to be Christians are still sinning. The author does not resolve the issue by quoting or analyzing particular passages in scripture but by appealing to the good news witnessed and experienced in Jesus.

The Old Testament provides examples of topical sermons as well. Ecclesiastes is a philosophical sermon about the apparent meaninglessness of life, Job is a story-sermon about the problem of innocent suffering, and Amos is an oracle-sermon about social injustice. These sermons of the Bible do not engage in scriptural

exegesis. They are topical sermons that attempt to resolve a contemporary issue through reflecting on personal experience in light of the biblical encounter with God.

Topical preaching begins with and revolves around a contemporary issue, but it can be biblical in three senses: (1) it follows the rhetorical strategy of much of the Bible, (2) it is thoroughly dependent on the biblical witness for its understanding of God and ethical guidance, and (3) it illuminates the meaning of scripture as a whole (as opposed to one piece). This kind of topical preaching combines doctrinal and rhetorical form preaching approaches: it uses the rhetorical strategies of the Bible as a format, and diverse canonical themes and theology provide grounding and guidance.

Topical preaching has potential to bring immediate experience of the Word of God to us today. The preacher addresses concrete situations facing the congregation and proclaims (or, more humbly, suggests)—in light of what God has done—what God may be doing now and may want us to do now. This is essentially the preaching of a prophet. What could be more biblical?

Zwingli energized the Reformation through a new kind of biblical preaching. Inspired by his example, we continue to explore ways to preach biblically, and perhaps God's Spirit will pull us all up by the hairs of our heads!

Notes

[1] Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 163.

[2] Ryan Ahlgrim, *Not as the Scribes: Jesus as a Model for Prophetic Preaching* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002). Chapter 7, "Creating New Parables," examines Jesus' parable form and suggests how one might create new parables that function in a similar way. Previous chapters examine all of Jesus' rhetorical forms.

[3] The standard work analyzing the various literary forms of the Bible and how to preach them is by Thomas G. Long, *Preaching the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989).

[4] David L. Bartlett, "Texts Shaping Sermons," in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, edited by Gail R. O'Day and Thomas G. Long (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 150.

About the author

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