

“Not hearers only” Preaching invitationally

Dennis R. Edwards

Jane, the dean of faculty at the private school where I taught mathematics and chemistry to high school students, was an atheist.¹ But she seemed intrigued with the fact that I was pastor of a newly established congregation, and she would often ask me questions about my church and my faith, as well as my political views.

On Fridays, Jane’s typical question to me was, “What are you preaching about this weekend?” I hated that question. I prefer to think that I preach on biblical texts, not on topics, per se. I don’t like the notion that all the thought I’ve put into my sermon preparation can be reduced to a sound bite or a trite ethical admonition, such as be nice, pay your tithes, or don’t quit. Even so, I recognize that many people, ardent believers and atheists, ask preachers Jane’s Friday question.

Preaching invitationally means helping people connect the sermon to their lives and to God’s mission in the world. Invitation should be a regular part of our preaching, helping our messages move from theory to practice.

The sermonic invitation must follow practical instruction

People want to know what a sermon is about. Believers want to know what God is saying to them. They want to know what they are supposed to think and what they are to do. They want to know why they’ve had to pay dutiful attention to the preacher for twenty or thirty—or more!—minutes. They need to be able to connect the teachings of scripture to

their daily lives. Sermons must be practical. Sermons must help people connect their thinking to their actions. Sermons need to invite people to be doers of the word and not just hearers (James 1:22).

In addressing this need for practical sermons, some pay particular attention to preaching in an African American context. For example, Cleophus J. LaRue of Princeton University observes that “black

preachers rarely spend precious time in the pulpit engaged in abstract thought. The black quest for God has been based on the immediate hopes and aspirations of an oppressed community often discouraged and beaten back by life. Thus the black congregation desires to know if there is a word from the mighty Sovereign, whose power is made known through and reflected in their everyday life experiences.”² Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a predominately African American church where the preaching is not heavily practical, sometimes with more emphasis on the pragmatic than on biblical exposition.

Along with the pragmatism, one should also expect to hear an invitation given from the preacher. However, the typical invitation from the African American preacher is not necessarily connected to the main points of the sermon. The typical invitation is offered to those who are not yet believers; it is a call to salvation. The practical topics raised in the sermon are put aside during the time of invitation.

The sermonic invitation is more than a call to salvation

In African American churches, the invitation often does not directly follow the sermon. The invitation usually comes after a hymn—but

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not just any hymn! The hymn chosen for the invitation (“Just as I Am,” for example) is designed to focus on an initial conversion experience and decision to follow Christ. The part of the worship service following the sermon seems to be modeled after the old camp meetings or a Billy Graham crusade, where the goal is to see people converted and walking down the aisle. The chief form an invitation takes is that of an offer of salvation.

Yet there is a problem, in my view, when the invitation following a sermon has a focus mainly on the offer of salvation to unbelievers.

That type of invitation may cause the majority of listeners to fall into the trap of thinking that the only goal of scripture and interpretation is to bring one to an initial conversion to Christ. One might think, “I’m already a believer, so everything is OK. The preacher isn’t really talking to me!” Or perhaps even more likely, believers

might have a strong impression of the Spirit of God working in them through the sermon, but they may be stuck, not knowing what to do, because they have heard only an invitation to conversion.

We've all heard stories of people who on multiple occasions have prayed to receive Christ or be born again, because they don't know

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what else to do after having been repeatedly convicted by the Spirit of God. A prayer for conversion was all the preacher invited them to. I've been in contexts where believers were moved and did not respond to the invitation but after the service went looking for someone to help them sort through the feelings that welled up during the sermon. I wish all people were so diligent! Most people need the preacher to connect the dots.

To be fair, that invitation to Christian discipleship, as the offer of salvation is often called, may be accompanied by an invitation to backsliders to make a renewed commitment to faith. And sometimes the preacher's invitation might include a call for people to come forward for a brief time of personal prayer with the pastor or another church leader. These are good invitations. But rarely does the invitation following a sermon go beyond the basic call for salvation. Even the call for prayer is general and often vague. Invitational preaching needs to be more specific.

My contention is that while a general invitation is better than no invitation, it would be more helpful for the preacher to offer specific invitations. Invitations should be connected to the practical points in the sermon and should call people to follow the Lord in particular ways. The application points made in the sermon can be reinforced in the invitation. More specific invitations will help listeners realize that the change the scripture calls for includes an initial repentance and conversion, yes, but also a continual turning toward the Lord. We all need to "work out our salvation" (Phil. 2:12), and we all benefit from explicit ideas about how to do that.

The sermonic invitation needs to be specific

To be sure, all sermons may have an evangelistic appeal; they all deal with the good news in some way or another. Indeed, almost every

week I make an appeal for people to begin a journey with the Lord Jesus, based on their acknowledgement of sin, their renunciation of it, and their prayerful desire to follow the Lord. But in addition to that appeal, I invite everyone—unbeliever, new believer, as well as seasoned believer—to various specific actions connected to the themes of the sermon.

I recently finished a sermon series based on the book of Hosea. That book deals dramatically and at times graphically with spiritual adultery, as God's people are accused of infidelity because of their idolatry. During the sermon that included chapter 11, I was struck with the expression of God's emotions at the end of verse 8. *The New Living Translation* renders it this way: "My heart is torn within me,

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and my compassion overflows." I wondered whether we think of the Lord having feelings. My invitation was for everyone to stop and think about a relationship they have had that did not work out, or one in which someone lied to them or even cheated on them. I asked them to list their feelings, and I gave them time to do so. I then asked them, "What would have to happen for trust to develop again?" I tried to make the connection between the feelings we

may face in our human relationships and those feelings that God has when his people cheat on him.

Sometimes, as on that Sunday, my invitations require action at that very moment. Sometimes my invitations require a visible response, such as coming up to an elder at the end of the service, or raising one's hand to commit oneself to a particular activity in the life of the church. However, many of my invitations ask deliberation beyond the moment. Some people are prone to make responses more emotional than substantial. Of course I want feelings to be involved, but a lasting impact requires more than emotion.

The sermonic invitation respects human diversity and congregational circumstances

When I am the guest speaker at another congregation, I am not always aware of the particular challenges that congregation is facing. Then my invitations are general. At churches that are not predominately African American, there may not be a separate time for an

invitation, so my appeal will be part of my sermon. But with my own congregation I have found it helpful to consider the following questions:

What admonition in the sermon is especially challenging for me? I figure I have many of the struggles those in my congregation have. At the least, I can rely on my capacity for empathy. Reflecting on my own struggles and the struggles of others I know helps me identify what is likely to be difficult for my congregation.

What do I need to change to help me address the challenges communicated in the sermon? Sometimes I need a change in perspective on my situation. Sometimes I need to be reminded that God is good and desires to help me. Sometimes I simply need to change certain behaviors.

What resources are available to help me make the necessary changes? Of course the Holy Spirit is willing to help me change. I also remind listeners that in a genuine community of faith we help one another tackle the challenges we face.

What type of invitation will be most helpful to my listeners?

This is the hardest question for me to answer, because people differ

The goal is to have listeners know that God expects some sort of response. It is God, after all, who is making the invitation to join in his mission. The preacher's task is to make the invitation clear.

in the ways they learn. I am a typical left-brained individual, and my natural inclination would be to invite people to *think* differently; I would give them propositions to consider. But after many years of teaching and preaching, I've observed some of the different ways people learn. Therefore my invitations sometimes require movement (coming forward to speak with an elder, for example); sometimes they require visualization (a slide of artwork designed to motivate, for example); and some-

times they require immediate interaction with another person (or other people) in the congregation.

One might consider many other questions when framing an invitation; these are starting points. The goal is to have listeners know that *God expects some sort of response*. It is God, after all, who is making the invitation. It is God asking us to join him in his mission, not just with an initial conversion, but in various and sundry ways, depending on the situation at the time. The preacher's task is to make the invitation clear.

Conclusion

Preaching invitationally means helping people connect the practical teaching of the sermon to their own lives and to God's mission in the world. Invitation should be a regular part of our preaching, helping our messages move from theory to practice.

As it happens, Jane, my colleague at the independent school, had lived in Alabama during the Civil Rights era. She and her husband often went to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery to hear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preach. Jane, an atheist, was drawn to the prophetic sermons of Dr. King that called people to specific ideals and actions. Even though Jane remained an atheist, she could not help but feel invited to look at the world differently, and that had an impact on her as an educator. So I reflect on Dr. King and other powerful preachers and consider Jane's Friday question. I may not like being asked, "What are you preaching about?" but I know I had better be preaching about something and inviting listeners to respond in tangible ways.

Notes

¹ I have changed my colleague's name to protect privacy.

² Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 125.

About the author

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