

What is the Bible's authority in preaching?

June Alliman Yoder

A little girl was watching her father prepare a sermon. “How do you know what to say?” she asked. “God tells me,” he answered. “Then why do you keep crossing it out?” she wondered.

This little story so neatly lays out the question of authority in preaching. Where does our preaching come from? And what is the source of our authority as preachers? These often-asked questions are connected to the often-repeated assertion that “what this church needs is a biblical preacher!” What we rarely realize is how complicated that expectation is. Each of us has our own idea of what biblical preaching is, and we seldom stop to define the terms.

John C. Holbert notes that for some, a true biblical preacher

will quote the Bible with energy and conviction and as often as pulpit time will allow. One might call this the quantitative preacher of the Bible; the more quotes from the scripture the more biblical the sermon will be. Perhaps then a good old expository sermon would be best, preferably one verse at a time.

Others will assume that true biblical preaching will tell the biblical story with grace, no little humor, and a sacred electricity that will light up the room. Biblical exposition, verse by verse, is not necessary. But constant rootage in the stories, psalms, proverbs of the sacred text is. The sanctuary air should be charged with scripture, filled with scripture, saturated with scripture.

Still others on the prowl for biblical preaching will want a biblical linguist. Nothing like a sprinkling of Hebrew, Greek, even Aramaic to provide ancient wisdom to the hearer, not to mention awed adulation from those deeply impressed by the sounds of mysterious tongues. Nothing

*like a little Hebrew or Greek confidently spoken to make even the thinnest point sound all the sharper.*¹

Such approaches may be biblical preaching, but we do well to remember that preachers are called to preach the gospel, not the Bible. To preach the gospel is to be a biblical preacher; to preach the Bible may or may not make one a biblical preacher. The authority of the Bible is the gospel, not the Bible itself.

Scripture is not the subject matter of the sermon. The canon is the lens by which gospel preachers see God's presence in the world and understand the meaning of that presence, which they then offer to the congregation.

To be relevant, biblical preaching must do more than say what the Bible says. Biblical preaching must be more than an expository updating of the ancient text for the present. Holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other is inadequate; preachers need to read the news through a biblical lens. Scripture is not the subject matter of the sermon. Instead the canon is the chosen lens by which gospel preachers see God's presence

in the world and understand the meaning of that divine presence, which they then offer to the congregation. The task of post-modern preachers, therefore, is to help congregations re-member the presence of God in their lives and determine the significance of that presence for their understanding of God, self, and world. Clearly, scripture is one significant source of this understanding.

Preaching is a complex communication event, and the matter of sources is one thing that makes it so complex. I have observed that preachers often spend lots of time trying to figure out what the message is but ignore the issue of what shapes the message. Yet it is what shapes the message that really has the authority.

Many think that the Bible is clearly the source from which we as Mennonites preach. But although the scripture is an essential source of authority, it is not the only source. I contend that preaching in the Anabaptist tradition is shaped by four different entities: scripture, the Holy Spirit, the preacher, and the congregation. All four function with one another as well as in tension with one another. And all four need to be present, although perhaps not obviously so, for the sermon to have authority. In what follows, I want to examine the four entities that give our preaching authority. Far from seeing scripture as the single source

for our preaching, I am convinced that we cannot even understand the place of the Bible in the preaching puzzle until we grasp where the other authoritative pieces fit.

The Holy Spirit

Those who study the radical reformation have argued that some Anabaptists devalued scripture and put in its place a sole reliance on the Holy Spirit. For many Anabaptists, the word of God is broader than the Bible. We sometimes talk about the word of God as both the written word (scripture), and the living word (Spirit). Hans Denck wrote in 1528:

Holy Scripture I hold above all human treasure, but not as high as the Word of God that is living, powerful, and eternal . . . for, since it is God himself, it is Spirit and not letter. . . . Therefore, salvation is not bound to Scripture however useful and good it might be in furthering it.

Rationale: It is not possible for Scripture to reform an evil heart even though it enhances its learning. But a devout heart, containing a true spark of divine zeal, is improved through all things. . . . To believers, therefore, holy Scripture is for the good and for salvation, . . . as are all things.²

Sometimes the Spirit is understood to be in charge of the preaching event. In the Swiss Mennonite church of times past, the ministers would meet in a little room just off the sanctuary a few minutes before the service was to begin. In this meeting, they would decide who was going to preach that morning and what the text would be. Then they would proceed into the sanctuary, and worship would begin. In this preaching model, the Spirit is prominent as the authoritative source of the message. Although the process included a scripture text, the role of the Spirit in lifting a message from the text was the ultimate source.

Some preachers have another view. They tend to ignore the Holy Spirit. For these people, it is the preacher's job to study the text and do the necessary work to shape the message. The Spirit is not needed, except when preachers are not doing their work well.

Both extremes—saying the whole preaching task belongs to the Spirit or that none of the preaching task belongs to the

Spirit—are wrongheaded. The Spirit’s authority is just one piece of the puzzle, but the healthy collaboration of the Holy Spirit in the preaching event is essential for sound, authoritative preaching. The work of preaching begins and ends with the Spirit, and those who ignore the Spirit’s authority are not preaching the gospel.

The human community

One of the most under-noticed sources of the message of preaching is the human community. When we think of preaching, we usually think of speaking, and we overlook the need to listen to the congregation, to other believers who are experts on the text or topic before us, or to the larger context around us. The human community plays an authoritative role in preaching.

That congregations call people to be their pastors and preachers reflects the authority of the human community in preaching.

Through the work of good preaching, people in the listening congregation are changed. For this transformation to happen, preaching must include a clear understanding of the needs of the congregation.

From this call a pastor derives the authority to preach. But it is an authority given by the voice of the human community of the congregation. In contrast to the practice of some other Christian traditions, in the Anabaptist tradition authority to preach comes from the congregation of believers.

The needs of individuals in the congregation and the congregation’s corporate needs should both shape the message of the sermon. The preacher’s task is to be aware of the needs of the congregation. Through the work of good preaching, people in the listening

congregation are changed. For this transformation to happen, preaching must include a clear understanding of the needs of the congregation.

Sometimes a significant gap exists between what individuals in the congregation need and what the congregation as a whole needs. The preacher must often hold the text and the congregation next to one another and listen for a message in the text that speaks to the needs of the congregation.

Preachers often benefit from turning to the work of scholars. Through their commentaries on the text, these experts also become sources. The historical and contemporary record of other

preaching on the text is also a source to be acknowledged. Sermons given by others are a part of the human community that may be a preaching source.

The larger human condition, the context beyond the congregation, also shapes the message and therefore becomes an authoritative source. As the preacher interprets the text, so the preacher needs to interpret the congregation and the times. We live in a world filled with fear and violence, as terrorism, war, economic uncertainty, drug abuse, and a host of other issues remind us. The world situation becomes a source that shapes our preaching.

Preaching is significantly shaped by the human community: the congregation and other believers, the community, and the wider world. Preaching that does not take into account the role the human community plays in shaping the message is mere exegesis or Bible study.

The person of the preacher

Many listeners believe that 90 percent of the sermon arises from the preacher, but most preachers believe their sermons include very little of themselves. They prefer to think that the text and the Spirit and the needs of the congregation far outweigh their own impact on the sermon. But the person of the preacher is a significant influence and authority for the sermon.

In sermon preparation, the preacher's influence extends to the choice of text, the message from that text to focus on, the need in the congregation to attend to, the purpose to promote, the structure to be used, the selection of illustrations, and the application to highlight.

And obviously it is the preacher who stands before the congregation to preach. We do well to remember that in speech much of the communication depends on the presence and appearance of the preacher. Ways of encoding the message include gestures, eye contact, word choice, voice quality, rate, volume, pitch, grammar, mannerisms, and use of notes. An otherwise fine message can sometimes be drowned out by the noise that surrounds the preacher.³

There is yet another layer. In part, the preacher's authority derives from the congregation's call, which grants the pastor authority to preach. But a pastor's preaching authority also derives

from her person and life. Is she a person of integrity? Do people trust her? Is she someone they like? Has she earned the respect of the congregation?

Whatever influences the preacher plays a role in how he will experience the call to preach, the preparation to preach, and the preaching event itself. We cannot ignore the authority of the person of the preacher in the preaching event.

The written word

Anabaptist writings are heavily seasoned with biblical quotations. A glance establishes that our forebears' preaching took its authority from the scripture. Now Mennonites around the world name their seminaries "biblical" instead of "theological" seminaries. It is the Bible that stands at the center of our understanding of God, of

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Jesus, and of ourselves in relation to the divine, to one another, and to the world. In this tradition, we expect preaching to be rooted in the Bible and in the Jesus whom the scriptures proclaim.

We prize biblical authority, and we expect sermons to be centered in a biblical text. We come to the scriptures because we believe that in them we will meet God, and that if we linger there, we will hear a message regarding

new and right living in Jesus. It is not that we believe in scripture; rather we believe in the One we encounter and know through scripture. The events of long ago and far away begin to have a claim on our lives here and now. So the preacher goes regularly to scripture to find the message that will form the congregation as God's people in our present context.

The early Anabaptists preached by giving witness to what the Spirit had revealed to them. They sometimes used this language of *witness*: the preacher was a witness inspired by the text, illuminated by the Spirit, and authorized by the congregation.

Collaboration of authority

Those who study homiletics continue to look for a model that adequately describes preaching. Their difficulty in creating a satisfying model reflects the multivalent nature of preaching. All

such models suggest that preaching happens somewhere in the engagement between scripture, the human context, and the person of the preacher. But to those we must add the authority of the Holy Spirit. The biblical text is important, but the Spirit is its illuminator; it is the Holy Spirit who inspired it and who makes its message evident to the preacher. The human situation is vital, but it is the Holy Spirit who inspires the community of believers and fills their ears and hearts. And it is the Holy Spirit who calls and prepares the preacher and attends to the preaching of the word.

Our preaching is prompted on every side by the Holy Spirit. Biblical preaching has authority not only because of our expertise in Greek and Hebrew, not only because of our many years of practicing biblical exegesis, not only because of our shelves of commentaries and theology books, not only because of our extensive experience in pastoral ministry. The authority of our preaching rests with the Holy Spirit who has given us the text and who makes known to us the messages in it, who attends to the congregation and helps preachers see what word is most needed and can be heard. And it is because of their life with the Spirit that preachers can offer a word to their congregations.

So there abide these four: scripture, community, preacher, and Spirit, but the greatest of these is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit inspired the scripture, the Spirit speaks to the preacher through the scripture, and the congregation's needs are made known to the preacher through the Spirit. The Spirit is like an umbrella overarching the preaching event, under which the scripture, the preacher, and the congregation live and learn and are inspired.

Notes

¹ "Preaching Biblically: A Slippery Conundrum," an unpublished paper presented at the Academy of Homiletics meeting in December 2003.

² Clarence Bauman, *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 251.

³ *Noise* is a technical term for sound, activity, or visual interference that impedes the communication of the intended message. It can be in the worship space or in the mind of the individual, but here I am focusing on the noise the preacher produces.

About the author

June Alliman Yoder is professor of communication and preaching at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN), where for twenty-three years she has tried (in vain!) to define and analyze the mystery of preaching.