

Praying and Preaching in the Life of the Church

I. Preaching

“Some are called to be preachers.” Only God truly knows who they are.

There is a difference between being called to proclaim truth and to preach it. Proclaiming is another word for overt worship to which all Christians are commonly called. Preaching is a vocational and professional call to proclaiming for the sake of Christ’s church.

All preachers are in some sort of spiritual condition before God. Only God fully knows this condition.

Preachers are, like all of us, redeemed sinners with as rich an inventory of sinfulness as anyone. They therefore add to their sin if they preach as if from a higher level or a depersonalized distance. In medical terms, they are technical healers without a hint of a bedside manner.

Preachers are basically redeemed salesmen and if their dedication has not been thoroughly swept clean by the Spirit; if godly authority is sacrificed to personal charisma; if the flesh is just that too much apparent; if personal idiosyncrasies outrun content; if “I” is the lead pronoun and “I-ness” the lead atmosphere, then God must cope with self-worship, even narcissism. (Die in his own arms).

Sometimes, I’m tempted to think that for some, the vocation of preaching is chosen because it is way of showing off over which holy water is poured. (Dad: preacher’s itch; “I have just come from the presence of God”).

O, but there are lovely, good, Christ-centered, Spirit-driven, God-honoring pastors, most of them hidden away in what can only be described as “the average church.” And if God-centered preaching is known only by the mega-church, then there are precious few Christ-centered preachers. And I believe our civilization is full of them, and they simply go to work, as a craftsman does to his shop. They simply plug away while, for some reason, they get lost in the numbers-driven ethos of a calculating, measuring culture.

Truly anointed, humbled and thirsty preachers know all of this, strive to stay clean of it and find quiet assurance in the same God who has gifted and called them.

And all anointed preachers know that Satan lurks as an accuser and an angel of light in drag. They know further that there is only one worship war, that between God and Satan.

Preaching is not only an act of worship, but a continuous call to continuous worship through continuous sojourn through the truths of scripture, practiced according to the needs and duties of the flock assigned to them.

The chief pastor should be the chief worship expert and authority in the assembly. With due respect, if the title “worship leader” refers to certain selected actions in corporate worship, usually music and limited public prayer, this already more than implies a truncated theology of worship that arbitrarily excludes some activities and emphasizes others..

I would like to think that the “lead” pastor has two inter-related duties: to preach and to be the chief shepherd over the entire liturgy.

Aside from the musical/congregational aspect of corporate worship, the heart and soul of public worship is Word-/word-centered. So let me talk a bit about words.

I fully believed that the utmost attention must be paid to wisdom, richness, and skill with words in all pastoral work in public worship.

American language usage is in poor condition throughout its many practical centers, and I would like to think that its rescue and reformation is above the responsibility of the church. What a way to invade culture!

But in ever so many churches, poor usage obtains, both from undedicated sloppiness to another way of being “cool” of being street-smart and relevant—identifying with the verbal cool of a society whose common verbal dignity has been reduced to but a skimmed milk, dream whip fraction of the richness of all spoken language.

The loosening of accuracy; loss of poetic side.

Superlatives have been exhausted. Everything is awesome; everybody doing simple citizen’s Samaritan work is now a hero. New commentators cannot make it through a sentence without blowing a booger in it. Politicians—well, they range from the politically eloquent and the practically hypocritical, to the simple liars, exaggerators, and word-pimps. Technocrats speak technog-ese; bureaucrats speak bureacrut-ese; lawyers speak in tongues; jazzers speak jive talk; artists, well, like, let their art talk; advertisers speak utopian-ese; texters, huddled together at Starbucks talk great distances through their thumbs in abbrevat-ese. The narrower people get, so goes their talk. The shallower people get, so goes their speech. The loss of intellectual curiosity; in Washington, there are no more ideas. In the Church, where are the idea in contrast to memorized pronouncements. He Christian mind, of all, minds, should be the most curious and unsatisfied.

Yes, language is a part of human creativity. Yes, it’s an artifact. Yes, it is fleeting, fragile, fallen, rich, and versatile. And yes, it is humanly practiced and humanly controlled. And, yes, as humans go; as they grow, wither, narrow down, go shallow or deep; soar with eagles’ wings or wallow in the sand; as they wrestle, face up to the mysteries, or shrink from them, so goes their speech, and to an alarming extent, so goes culture. And when the culture in effect shoots up with shallowness—ornamented shallowness at best—so goes its ability to call from deep to deep. And for Christianity, the faith—so rich, so intangibly tangible, so fraught with wonder, so endowing the thinking heart and the heartfelt mind, lies untilled, unfed, unproductive.

And yes, human language is the primary, if not the exclusive, conveyor of Truth. If it were other wise, the Son of God would have become the incarnate dancer, the incarnate painter, the incarnate tune smith, not the Living Word. Truth is the most important gift we have. It deserves mastery of the language. Remember this: God’s pure Word transcends all human language. The power of the Word;

the Word of the power. No man can see God and live. The same with His Word no one can hear it without being thrown to the ground. God **is** Word. Yes, Scripture is God's word—this we would die for. But in its salvific all-sufficiency, it is still articulated with the fallen instrument of human speech, by fallen people, God's ministers. It must be studied, and to the extent of our consecrated gifts and abilities as proclaimers, used richly, concisely, and authoritatively. I know, God will use anything to His glory, but why force Him to? And I know that God's Spirit can take a consecrated, humbled lisp and tune it to the eternities, but that should not give reason for us to lisp.

Polish your inventory of speech possibilities, but don't let this lead you into verbal complexities and convolutions such that, if you want to find the verb, wait till next week.

C. S. Lewis, Eugene Peterson, great sermons, Hemingway's short stories, yes, John Grisham, Mark Twain, Mark Noll, Mark Helprin, N. T. Wright—on and on. Look for rich word combinations, new adjectives, new adverbs.

None of the foregoing has strictly to do with the content of your preaching, your language skills—your style—will make or break the extent to which your content goes straight home to faithful hearers.

What are your reading habits? Why do you read? Aba Eban.

Praying for the preacher: Should be a strategic part of the laity's prayers. Not just a whiff of blessing, but real intercession. If you have a complaint, be sure it's not about you. If the preacher is in a slump, ask the Lord for new life.

II. Praying.

A profoundly personal way of worshiping. Instant in praying, ceaseless praying. In a primary way, most prayer is unspoken. "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire; Unuttered or expressed; The motion of a hidden fire within a believer's/Christian's breast." If we live unto the Lord, then doing so is a continuous prayer, in which living-as-prayer is overlaid and particularized with occasional prayer.

Public praying is another form of proclamation: 1) Speaking to God on the basis of His Word; 2) Adoration and Petition are in themselves homilies, ways of instruction.

Well planned, whether long or short. Verbal richness of preaching should be matched by praying.

Improvised prayer/written prayer? Both, especially if improvisation is properly understood. Improvisation is the direct result of learning to think *in the* growing knowledge you possess. In this sense composition and improvising can be described this way: Composition is improvisation slowed down; improvisation is composition speeded up. Something akin to the comparison of a winery to Cana.

Composition and improvisation should not randomize or lead to the refuge of the verbally destitute: the cliché.

Difference between form(s) and shape(s)

Study the great prayers in prayer books, especially the Episcopalian in both old and new language.

Study the collects: models of conciseness and eloquence. Practice this form over and over, using your own verbal style. The form is simple: 1) a context-centered/descriptive address to God; 2) a petition or petitions flowing out of the nature of the address; 3) the result cast in terms of Kingdom and personal growth; 4) a closing phrase, either general (through Christ our Lord) or related to the theme-specific nature of the opening salutation.

Chain them together, either serially or seamlessly. Practice improvising them.

Spend time writing prayers, especially "WHY?" prayers that range everywhere. You'll find that your imagination is whetted as never before. You'll find that the fear of saying the wrong thing will turn out to be the opposite as you think and imagine your way through any number of wonders, facts, mysteries, paradoxes, and truths. In all cases, God's Word is the final boundary, but a much wider boundary than usual, cobbled together, semi-cloned prayers are.

The prayers of great Christians: The early Fathers, the Reformers, 20-th and 21st century Christians. Roman Catholics, for goodness' sake, among the lot: Barth, Moltmann, von Speyer, Rahner, von Balthazar.

Dumbfounded Praying turned out as a result of beginning to write prayers as an aspect of doing theology in its broadest sense. Kindness and support of E. Peterson. I have no copies with me: Amazon and Kindle.

Start writing your own psalms. Work on paraphrases of the Lord's Prayer.

Prayer is another, very personal way of working through biblical content, through theology, through exegesis.

What is the Word of God most concerned with? The glory of God; The glory of the Cross, the transcendence of the purposes of God in the resurrection of His Son; the growth, cleansing and health of the Kingdom thru the ambassadorial work of its citizens; the command to spread Good News to the end that God's will that no one perish be realized.

If this is the concern of God's Word, it must be the driving concern of all our praying.

"He is within us; seek Him not elsewhere."