

WHAT ROLE DOES THE CONGREGATION HAVE IN THE TASK OF PREACHING?

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to consider the role of the community in preaching, both in the task of preparing and communicating the message. At issue is the question “With whom does the preacher stand—with the people as the first listener to the text or with God as the most recent teller?”¹ It’s an important question, given the role of preaching itself. P.T. Forsyth once declared that Christianity stands or falls, depending upon its preaching.² From the beginning, it has been a primary means of instruction. The quality and depth of discipleship depends heavily upon it.³

I am both a pastor and a professor. Having preached for nearly thirty years, I have in more recent years wrestled with the role of the congregation, both in the preparation and delivery of a sermon. Many others have as well. Advocates of a “New Homiletic” have argued for a shift from traditional preaching, to seeing the sermon as more of an event, an engagement, a dialogue.⁴ In other words, the end of monologue in the pulpit. Part of the driving force has been the desire for relevancy. Application has become as important, if not more important, than proclamation. Some of the advocates include Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, and Lucy Rose. A more contemporary voice, critical of monological preaching, is Doug Pagitt, who describes the current practice as “a tragically

¹ Eugene Lowry, “The Revolution of Sermonic Shape”, Listening to the Word, 102.

² PT Forsyth, “The Authority of the Preacher” in The Company of Preachers, 99.

³ Thomas Oden, Pastoral Theology, 127

⁴ Gehard Ebeling, The Problem of Historicity, 14.

broken endeavor”.⁵ If there is any hope of recovery, it must begin with a shift from monological to dialogical preaching.

A postmodern culture agrees. We are, in the words of James Houston, “in a state of reaction against monologue.”⁶ We live in a “resituated church”, a church of exiles who need room, space that allows for ambiguity.⁷ Hence, the preacher must ask himself if it is his role to remain in complete control of the material or become “sojourners with the laity”. Should he go it alone or see preaching as a collaborative effort, in which a “co-creation” is at work in the sermonic experience? How far does one go down the conversational path? Is it dialogical enough to say, “I consider my audience and their needs”?

For a growing number, dialogical goes further. Real dialogue has to at least be an engagement with the congregants in questions, some I already know the answers to and some I don’t, gaining their wisdom, though continuing the direction God has sent me on. But some might carry dialogue this far: “I engage with questions I do not necessarily have any answers to, open to what God may speak into the community, open to the fact that this may lead the sermon a whole different direction”.

Some refer to this as a “progressional dialogue”, where some, most, or even all of the content is established in the context of a healthy relationship between presenter and listeners, and substantive changes in the content are then created as a result of this relationship.⁸ The inevitable result is a shift in the locus of authority from the preacher to the congregation. Pagitt and others would say this preaching is the needed way of the

⁵ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined*, 19.

⁶ James Houston, *Joyful Exiles*, 15.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 42

⁸ Pagitt, 23.

future. Preaching must be less about “to the church” and more about “from the church”.⁹ In this dialogue, the preacher must not only speak to the church—the church must speak to the preacher.

But is this going too far? Is there theological justification? Is it more reflective of biblical preaching to travel along a singular road, gathering momentum as the sermon moves towards conclusion—or is it scriptural to lure the congregation to join the journey—which may take the sermon to another destination? If one enters the homiletical journey with other people in the car, would it interfere, and so compromise the proper destination?

Some would say it depends upon the goal of preaching. Carol Noren writes: “Persuasion to a particular point of view and/or transmission of religious truths are not the goals of the preacher. Instead, preaching is a profound act of human connection and intimacy”¹⁰ What’s important is a journey with a full vehicle exploring together the mystery of the Word for the lives of worshippers. What matters is that they gather symbolically at the round table where there is no head and no foot, where the sermon’s content is a proposal offered to the community of faith.¹¹ The aim is not so much to win consent to a truth claim as it is to experience mutual edification.¹²

But is this so? In the act of progressional dialogue, are we not compromising the aim of preaching? Is not the imparting of truth and the persuasion to follow inherent in preaching? Isn’t it ultimately a divine act of evoking: an event that cannot be coerced into being, in which, in a mysterious way, the word is proclaimed, and minds become

⁹ PT Forsyth, Positive Preaching and The Modern Mind, 53.

¹⁰ Carol Noren, the Woman in the Pulpit, 130.

¹¹ Eugene Lowry, The Sermon, 27.

¹² Lucy Rose, “Conversational Preaching”, 34.

opened and receptive to divine action, to the living word of God?¹³ Is it preaching to make pleasant sounds with fill in the blank content? How can it be preaching if a sermon begins to resemble a small group discussion? Am I a preacher or a facilitator? These are some of the questions this article aims to address.

We must first begin with the question—“How did we get here?”

1-THE RATIONALE FOR DIALOGICAL PREACHING

There are a number of reasons that explain the shift in preaching.

A-The Mediocrity of Contemporary Preaching

Preaching has fallen on hard times. There is an unevenness, even an ineptness when it comes to much of contemporary preaching. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, When God is Silent, as a lament over the present conditions. We have, as she puts it, a “famine in the land”.¹⁴ People are starving for the Word, for preaching that unleashes the heart of God. The warning of Amos has come true in the present day: “The time is surely coming says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). While it should perform a crucial, catalytic function, prompting, focusing, shaping, and nurturing the larger conversation of faith by which the community lives, preaching is playing a minor role in teaching people to obey.

B-The Ineffectiveness of Monological Preaching

¹³ Lowry, 37-38.

¹⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, When God is Silent, 26.

A second reason for arguing for dialogue goes to the very nature of communication. One-way communication is not especially useful. Preaching has to be a lot more than getting something said. It has to be about getting something heard. And in a passive context, much of the preaching falls on dead ears. Brueggemann, in his latest work, Cadences of Home, which is a call to preaching among exiles, notes that preaching in its present form might even be an enemy to spiritual transformation, even if it is excessively urgent and earnest.¹⁵ What preacher, whose preaching is largely a speech by one person, has not on occasion wondered if such an approach is effective? I know I have. Martin Marty, after years of preaching, concluded that the message has its greatest effect when it is most clear that “the people with whom I am a hearer are participating in preaching...[that] they are ‘preaching *with*’ [the preacher].”¹⁶ Such a partnership avoids the creation of passive listeners and creates a context for active learners. Passive hearing rarely leads to active behavior change.¹⁷

Some would even go further, and say that monological preaching is not only ineffective, it is damaging! Over time, it creates a sense of powerlessness.¹⁸ Speaking that has no input from the congregation, no input in the conclusions, and says to the hearers that if they disagree they are disobedient, is speaking that is dangerous. It becomes a form of “relational violence.” Anthony Trollope, writing as far back as the 1800’s, complained: “There is perhaps no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons”¹⁹ It’s

¹⁵ Brueggemann, 29.

¹⁶ Martin E. Marty, The Word: People Participating in Preaching, 19.

¹⁷ Robert Stephen Reid, “The Christian Century” Aug 22, 06

¹⁸ Pagitt, 22.

¹⁹ Anthony Trollope, Barchester Towers, 46.

not merely the matter of boredom, the compelling of an audience to sit and be “tormented”, but the improper exercise of authority.²⁰

C-A Suspicion Towards Clericalism

For some, monological preaching, “speaching”, reinforces the notion that much of ministry is about gaining control, reinforcing authority. Preachers have simply inherited a delivery system that goes back to Christendom, reinforced in the Enlightenment and its absolutist claims, where faith formation is best handled by the experts.²¹ Such preaching contributes to the professionalizing of the ministry. The pastor is the expert in the things of faith, in the ministry of the pulpit.²² Monological preaching is just one more part of an institutional church and its tendencies to be hierarchical, patriarchal, and authoritarian.

Behind all of this might be a reaction to foundationalism, which assumes unambiguous, even hegemonic certitude. There is a growing spirit of suspicion towards anyone who speaks with unambiguous certainty regarding the meaning of the text, the change that must happen in one’s life. It does not fit at all in a growing postmodern age that values dissensus, free play over imposed order, and an epistemological humility that is reticent to say, “Thus saith the Lord”.²³

Suspicion is reduced and interest is increased when a preacher takes the congregation with him, listening to their confessions, curiosities, and pain. For the reality is that ten different preachers will have ten different sermons. Each will read the text, as

²⁰ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 56

²¹ Pagitt, 28.

²² Ibid, 106.

²³ Lowry, 31.

well as the congregation, differently. The preacher, like every interpreter of a text, brings his or her history, biases, hopes, and fears to the sermon. No one can move in some superior, objective, neutral position. And so, group study of biblical passages can be a helpful corrective to individualistic interpretation.²⁴ What the preacher brings is a tentative interpretation of scripture that acknowledges his own biases and limitations. A sermon is nothing more than a preacher's "scenic overlook" along the preacher's journey, a journey the congregation is free to take or not take.²⁵ He makes proposals and advocacies, but does not make conclusions. As Rose puts it, "...in this topsy-turvy world, at times it is the preacher, particularly when we are in need of a season of silence, who becomes the groupie, the hanger-on, and it is a church member who speaks the life-restoring word."²⁶

Yes, there is risk, vulnerability. After all, where might this conversation end? What if it goes a completely different direction than the preacher intended? But isn't this dancing on the edge of mystery? Isn't a congregant's true longing for a preacher with a thirst for chaos, with a respect for everyone's creative thought?

D-A Desire for Greater Inclusion

People prefer a more democratic approach. With the rise of individualism, the shift to mass culture, everyone sees themselves as having a voice. Even the nightly news invites viewer response. People want to be more participatory. They resist absolute assertion. As Leonard Sweet notes, "They want out of the bleachers and onto the

²⁴ Ibid, 31.

²⁵ Ibid, 29.

²⁶ Ibid, 30.

court.”²⁷ They want to be interactive. Even Stott made the remark years ago that hearers do not want to feel that this is nothing more than “a monologue by a moron to mutes”.²⁸

Congregants, after all, have something to bring to the table. One of the great theological truths is perspicuity, the historic conviction of Scripture’s understandability, as well as the right and responsibility of each believer to interpret Scripture. The Bible affirms its own clarity (Dt 6:6-7; Ps 199:130). After all, Paul did not write his letters to pastors, but to the church.

Greater inclusion is part of what marks a number of emerging churches. Part of the attraction is an inclusion people cannot find in many institutional churches. There is a fresh casting of preaching, an alternative rhetoric, less certain, more capable of voicing unsure tentativeness and ambiguity. The changed epistemological climate now permits the lecturer only to make a proposal—but not to announce a conclusion to be received by the audience.²⁹ When they see a preacher engage in dialogical preaching, it declares that the listener not only matters—one must be respected for one’s right to dissent. It elevates the community, placing significant responsibility on their shoulders. It also shifts the load from the preacher. He is no longer the sole purveyor of truth and wisdom.³⁰ Outside of rare exceptions, he doesn’t want to be the person the whole community depends upon, the resident holy one, seated in the expert chair, who does not have space to grow because he is supposed to have already arrived.³¹

E-The Practice of Dialogue in Scripture

²⁷ Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 218.

²⁸ Stott, quoting REO White, p. 60.

²⁹ Brueggemann, 143.

³⁰ Pagitt, 45.

³¹ *Ibid*, 145.

Finally, a case for dialogical preaching goes back to God Himself. God is often dialogical in His communication. The Old Testament is the story of God conversing with man. God reveals Himself to David, to Job, and a dialogue ensues. Even the message of the prophets was occasionally in dialogue (cf Mal 1:12; 2:17; 3:8). They do this because, at the heart of any healthy relationship is conversation. Without it, there is no rapport. And what's the point of preaching, if there is no relationship?

Much of Jesus' teaching was conversational. He spoke, and listeners were provoked to respond to his questions (see Lk 10:36; Matt 21:40). The first evangelists practiced dialogue (Acts 19:8; 24:25). Paul voiced the arguments of his audience (cf Rom 3:1-6; I Cor 6:12-13; 7:1). Even the very term used to describe the art of preaching, homiletics, should tell us something. It is derived from *homileo*, used in the NT to describe a conversation (Luke 24:14; Acts 24:26).

2-A RESPONSE TO DIALOGICAL PREACHING

There's much to be said for the above arguments. Few can argue with the opinion that preaching has become ineffective. Hughes Oliphant Old would agree with Taylor:

The worst of all our problems with being a true church is our awkwardness in preaching the Word. We have forgotten how to do it. We may claim to be the heirs of Luther and Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Haddon Spurgeon, but we are just plain clumsy in the pulpit. No one listens to us anymore. We have shortened our sermons, we have filled them with jokes, we have cut them loose from all that tedious exegesis. We have made them relevant to the problems of our day, but no one comes to hear us anymore.³²

But is the solution a shift to dialogical preaching? It is true that sermons that involve the hearers in the active and mutual creation of meaning can be

³² Hughes Oliphant Old, *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed by William Placher, 240.

“communicationally and psychologically” more effective. But are they faithful to the biblical calling of preaching? Are they consistent with our theology?

Part of the challenge of responding theologically is that, outside of Barth, it is hard to find a systematic theology that deals with the subject of preaching. Which is amazing, considering that for years preaching has been considered of first importance to the church, “indispensable to Christianity.”³³ Barth spoke to the subject because he regarded theology as nothing other than sermon preparation in the broadest sense.³⁴ And when you look at Scripture, a good portion of the texts are either sermons or statements about sermons. So what do we find?

A-Preaching in the Old Testament

A brief overview indicates that when God sent His messengers, they usually declared His message without addition, subtraction, or collaboration. Moses declared God’s Law; Ezra preached while Israel wept. In similar fashion, God’s prophets came with the solemn task to declare, “Thus saith the Lord.” It was the introduction to most of their sermons (cf Eze 2:4; Amos 1:3). Men like Jeremiah spoke to exiles out of certitude, not out of ambiguity (Jer 2:2). Having stood in God’s council and listened for God’s voice, they came charged with an oracle, a “burden” they had no choice but to deliver (cf Is 13:1; 14:28). Progressional dialogue, in most cases, would have been out of place. As McKnight puts it:

The OT prophets often spoke against the community and would have thought it nonsense to engage the community in the process of coming up with the word. For them, the problem was the community, and they had a message from God that needed to be communicated to the community regardless of whether the

³³ Stott, 15.

³⁴ Karl Barth, Homiletics, 17.

community heard or understood. They were driven by an individual mandate from God.³⁵

B-Preaching in the New Testament

The New Testament opens as the Old Testament closes, with prophetic preaching, monological preaching. John the Baptist spoke, and following his ministry of proclamation, Jesus came preaching repentance, calling men to submit to His Lordship, beginning with the words “Thus saith the Lord” (Matt 4:17). This was His calling, and He would not be deterred (Mk 1:38). There were moments (the Sermon on the Mount being one), when Jesus preached and His followers listened. He gave His disciples the same preaching mandate (cf Mk 3:14; Luke 9:10). Acts is the record of God sending His servants to preach, and the Word grew and multiplied as a result (Acts 12:24).

Part of what explains this is that men like Paul saw themselves as those “appointed as a preacher” (I Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11). Like those before him, Paul saw himself not as merely one who presents a message, but one representing its Sender; hence his use of the terms *kyrusso* and *kerygma*, which are used over 100 times in NT. They describe the activity of a herald, one under the authority of someone else, sent to convey the message and intention of one’s master, with a view to persuading. Monological is, hence, inherent in the term.³⁶ The herald had no liberty of his own to negotiate, and what he announced became valid by the very act of proclamation. What authority he had was derived, underscored when it was clear he identified with the will of the Sender.

Paul’s use of the term, then, gives some insight into how he saw himself, how he viewed preaching. He was an anointed servant, a prophetic yet pastoral voice called to

³⁵ Scot McKnight blog

³⁶ Ken Langley, “Rehabilitating and Reclaiming the “Herald” Image for Preachers in the Secularized West”, paper presented to EHS, 2007

receive and rightly divide the word (Rom 10:15; 2 Tim 2:15). Paul was convinced of Scripture's sufficiency, its power to partner with the Holy Spirit and transform lives. Because heralding includes directness, urgency, seriousness, as well as summons, Paul's sermons were delivered with the same intensity (cf Acts 13:16-41). He saw himself as one under compulsion to preach (I Cor 9:16). He saw his words as the very word of God, as he boldly put it in I Thess 2:13: "You accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers".

He instructed those called to preach, those given a commission and authority, confirmed in the act of ordination, to preach with the same conviction, in season and out (2 Tim 4:2). Otherwise, how will they hear without someone to proclaim (Rom 10:13-17)? There is little hint of engaging in a dialectical enterprise with the congregation. But there was, and remains the warning, that some will not hear (cf Isaiah 9; Mark 4).

C-Preaching Beyond the New Testament.

Part of what has characterized preaching, from the early church fathers to the revivalists has been the conviction that preachers are servants of the Word of God, and preaching is a monological act. The authority of the preacher is rooted in the perceived task of a herald, the divine call to preach.³⁷ The early church father, Gregory of Nazianzus, spoke for many, "Not everyone is able to interpret Scripture in a pastorally appropriate manner."³⁸ While there is the priesthood of all believers, there is not necessarily the preacherhood of all believers.

³⁷ R. Albert Mohler, "Expository Preaching" in *Give Praise to God*, Boice, 117.

³⁸ Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, 22.

Centuries later, the Reformers were just as audacious in their claims about speaking and hearing the Word of God. The Second Helvetic Confession declared: “Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful.”³⁹ Luther declared that the Word of God was in the mouth of the preacher, and Calvin held that in preaching it is Christ himself who speaks.⁴⁰ This conviction has continued to more contemporary times, a conviction verbalized by Buttrick: “Christ transfers preaching to us, and gives grace to our speaking, so that, odd as it may seem, our sermons are the Word of God to human communities.”⁴¹

CONCLUSION

So which is it—monological or dialogical?

If we are faithful to preaching as modeled and commanded in Scripture, one cannot get away from the call to continue this prophetic task.⁴² It is part of the office, part of the commission from both God and the church. It comes out of receiving the gift of preaching, the laying on of hands by the body of Christ. The preacher has the sobering role of standing on the ramparts to hear from God, convinced of an objective authority. Charles Jefferson, a preacher at the turn of the twentieth century, described the preacher’s task this way: “Like a Moses, he must go up to the mountain and talk with God face to face, coming down and giving to his brethren his latest revelation.”⁴³ A preacher comes

³⁹ The Second Helvetic Confession, vol 3, The Creeds of Christendom, 4th ed., ed. Philip Schaff, 832.

⁴⁰ Placher, 228.

⁴¹ David Buttrick, Homiletic: Moves and Structures, 456-57

⁴² See my article in *Trinity Journal*, “The Prophetic Office as Paradigm for Pastoral Ministry”, (2000), 61-81.

⁴³ Charles Edward Jefferson, The Minister as Prophet, 4.

to God on God's terms so that he can say as Jesus, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from Him who sent me" (John 7:16).

It is a weighty responsibility. A preacher realizes he must make this audacious claim to speak the Word of God in human words. The word may not be heard in the wind, or found in the midst of a heavenly vision, but it will emerge within the interplay of skillful and contemplative exegesis. If one's words are to be used of God as His words, they must be the product of hours in the study giving close attention to Scripture, its language and setting. Like the prophet Ezekiel, he is commanded to "eat this book" (Eze 28:11). But he does so at risk. Receiving the Word can be like receiving a hot coal, a potter's fist, a hungry bear in the night—one receives and speaks it at the risk of one's life. Taylor, after years of preaching, describes the challenge: "To put God's word into a human mouth is to put flesh to its limit. It is like carrying nitroglycerin around in a crystal goblet."⁴⁴ One realizes that in the act of receiving a word from God, one may just as well be signing up to conduct lightning from heaven.

Out of all of this a preacher speaks an authoritative word. He is speaking for God. He is not passing along helpful information.⁴⁵ He is not merely establishing a theme, facilitating a discussion. He is coming with a Word. He is making conclusions, not merely proposals. He is bringing light to darkness. He has to, for our plight is that we are in darkness. We first need the light, the foundation of revelation. God must challenge our idols, penetrate the self-deceptions that overcome our hearts, and announce the judgment and grace of God. This can be nothing other than monological. Dialogue as a start point, creating meaning out of dialogue, is meaningless. All you have is the

⁴⁴ Taylor, 64.

⁴⁵ Michael Horton, A Better Way, 69.

horizontal. This does not imply power, nor control, nor autonomy in knowledge. One comes humbly to the task of being a simply being a conduit for God's voice.

But there must be a dialogical side. It should be a preacher's aim to engage the community and bring them into the preaching. This begins with listening to the text on behalf of the community, the "pioneer listeners", bringing their eyes and ears and lives with him. He listens to their fears, anxieties, and hopes. He listens *with* the congregation in order to listen *for* the congregation, to what God would say through the preacher to the congregation.⁴⁶ He listens as he preaches. Lots of things are being said, verbally and non-verbally in the moment. It does not necessarily compromise the preaching act to venture out of the pulpit and engage in conversation. As Lowry puts it, "the good pastor will not wander around in the texts alone, but with companions of congregation, culture, and liturgy as well."⁴⁷

In this case, the preacher comes with an inductive approach. He values experience, imagination, and especially mystery. He looks for what turns sideways in the text, and invites people into the journey. He does, after all, minister to a prophetic community! We give too little acknowledgement to this Pentecostal event where God declares "all of your sons and daughters will prophesy" (Acts 2:17). All in Christ have the Spirit. I Corinthians 14 describes a community where multiple prophetic voices engaged in worship. Colossians 3:16 exhorts the church to be a Word centered community, where the Word is ministered corporately, one to another.

Somewhere in the middle we find an answer, where homileo and keryx co-exist. We must avoid an extreme that reflects clerical hegemony, that shows an inadvertent

⁴⁶ Roger Van Harn, Can You Hear Us Listening?, 21.

⁴⁷ Lowry, 93.

disregard for hearers. But we dare not move to the other side, that flattens the unique call of a preacher, that denies the rightful place of proclamation by him. We must not turn the preaching moment into a dialogue, the sort that amounts to nothing more than pooled ignorance, going down rabbit trails in which there is no game at the end of the hunt. The fear is that we may be shifting this direction, where hearing the heart of God is less important than having the experience of community interaction, where process becomes the major part of the goal. Where the declarative, authoritative Word is lost.

The ultimate aim of the preacher is to move people into the same dialogue he has been engaged in—a dialogue between him and the text. As Oden notes, preaching is a spoken word that builds a bridge between hearer and Scripture.⁴⁸ And out of this, the most important dialogue must ensue—a dialogue between the hearer and God. It is this dialogue that is most important. What happens between the congregant and the preacher is secondary.

Perhaps, if we can get back to doing this right, we will hear, we will recognize good preaching. Few have summed it up better than Thomas Oden:

We know good preaching when we hear it. It touches us viscerally. It is a profound, subtle mode of communication that somehow makes the transcendence of Yahweh appear palpably immanent. It mixes courage and comfort, candor and sympathy, strength and vulnerability, in the kind of delicate blend achieved by an excellent cook. Most worshippers know that there have been rare and beautiful times when they have been privileged to hear such a word. When it happens, it is a remarkable event. It is a treasure in earthen vessels.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Oden, 130.

⁴⁹ Oden, 139.