

When the Preacher is a Teacher

Thomas G. Long

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

The idea I would like to pursue in this article is that preachers should be teachers in the pulpit, in a much more intentional way than many of us have become accustomed, and that our sermons should be, among other things, crafted instruments of Christian education.

As soon as I say this, I am aware that this thought — pouring ladles full of teaching into sermons — may be welcomed with all the pleasure of a fingernail scraped across a blackboard. After all, isn't it true that, for at least two decades, the literature of preaching has been moving sharply away from seeing sermons in a pedagogical light and has embarked upon a hungry quest for nondidactic models of preaching? Indeed, not so very long ago it was held that the primary *problem* of most preaching was that it was pedantic. While the world was coming apart at the seams, preachers were holding class, fogging up sanctuaries, churning out “teachy” sermons, paraphrasing Kittel's *Theological Wordbook*, tediously connecting the hip-bone of justification to the thighbone of sanctification.

Homileticians finally sensed that boredom in preaching had reached critical levels and dialed 911. They proclaimed a revolution in preaching style, one that continues on the increase to this day. Congregations, these homileticians said, were glazing over at the eyes, rapidly losing interest in sermons that pipeline biblical information and hammer away at doctrinal explanation. A new way of thinking about preaching was needed. New models of the preaching task were developed and, with great excitement, were rolled, one by one, into the showroom.

Now, these new styles of preaching are no longer the challengers to the establishment; they have become themselves the reigning fashion. As a consequence, most homileticians and practicing preachers generally agree that sermons are now supposed to stay as far from the schoolhouse as possible. They are to avoid the measured cadences of the schoolmaster in favor of the emotive language of the poet. They are to flow and to loop, to induct and to narrate. They no longer have content-saturated points plodding leaden-footedly across the sermon; they have energized moves and provocative images. They don't pound away at information; they dance across the imagination. They don't teach; they invoke and evoke.

Frankly, this has mainly been a welcome change for most of us who preach and for the people who listen to our sermons. More and more we preachers have finally broken loose from the shackles of the old propositional-styled homiletics and have been irrigating the fields with story, indirection, and poetic shock, with word pictures and fluid sermon forms. The rewards have been great. We have seen the scales fall from our congregations' eyes and have felt the hearers sitting up a bit straighter and more alert in the pews.

So, why reintroduce the notion of the sermon as an instrument of teaching? The very idea that we should trade in our albs and ballet slippers and return to those musty black teaching robes, ditched somewhere in the homiletical attic, sounds like something of a harrumph. Shouldn't sermons be experiential events rather than lectures? Why not let the pulpit be the pulpit and leave the lectern in the classroom?

The Congregation as a Place of Learning

The problem, though, is that it is more and more evident that the preacher stands before a congregation that does not know the content of the Christian faith. Except for a few narratives from the Bible that retain some wider cultural currency — the stories of Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, and the Lukan account of the nativity, for example — the biblical materials have largely faded from the memory of many congregations (there are exceptions to this rule, of course). Moreover, it is not only biblical awareness that has been damaged, but also the capacity to employ theological language. When pressed to describe the most urgent and profound realities of their lives, many now reach more readily for the language of therapy rather than the language of theology. Notions of sin, hope, sacrifice, and *agape* have been edged out by the vocabulary of codependency and self-actualization.

This is not a new problem, of course, but it is a deepening one and a critical one. The point is not that Christians need to be able to rattle off a list of the twelve disciples or to be able to provide top-of-the-head definitions for entries in a theological glossary. The point is that Christianity is more than a set of episodic experiences; it is a comprehensive way of seeing and being in the world.

To use something of a playful example, suppose that a baseball game is tied in the bottom of the ninth inning. There is no one out, and there is a runner on third base. If he scores, he is, of course, the winning run. Now, the batter swings at a pitch and lofts a high fly ball into foul territory deep in right field. The ball is high enough for the right fielder easily to move under it and catch it. Normally, that is exactly what he would do. Catching a ball on the fly puts the batter out, and that's usually a good thing. In this case, though, to catch the ball would be the height of stupidity, since it would allow the runner on third to tag up and score on the play, winning the game for the other team. So, the right fielder wisely allows the ball to drop to the ground, a harmless foul ball. What has happened is that the right fielder has had an experience — a ball hit in his direction — that could have yielded a variety of meanings and could have called for a variety of appropriate responses. How did the right fielder know which response to make? He placed the raw experience into the context of the basic and fixed documents of baseball (the rules) blended with the highly variable situation of the moment (score tied, man on third, nobody out, and so on), all in the blink of an eyelash. Though he would probably be astounded to know this, our right fielder has actually intuitively and successfully executed a quite sophisticated hermeneutical process.

So it is with Christian practice. In his fine book *How Faith Matures*, C. Ellis Nelson puts it well when he maintains that a Christian's faith matures "when life experiences are interpreted in the light of the Christian tradition in order to understand and do the will of God amid ongoing events in which that person is involved. Because a congregation is part of the body of Christ, it is the place where individuals receive guidance, as they work out the meaning of their experiences, and support as they attempt to follow the leading of God's Spirit."¹ Among the virtues of this statement is the fact that Nelson pictures a congregation as an environment in which faith grows and matures through an interaction of conversation, education, discipleship, and care. Like the ball player on the team, Christians in congregations bring together their knowledge of the basic materials of the faith and the ever changing situations of their lives in order to make decisions about proper responses. Experience is crucial, but it must be "interpreted in the light of the Christian tradition." In short, Christians need

to know something about the language, categories, and claims of the Christian tradition in order for their faith to mature.

But why should the responsibility for teaching fall on the shoulders of the preacher? If congregations need to become knowledgeable in order for faith to grow, why not do some CPR on the Sunday school? Isn't that the proper agency for education in the church? Nelson challenges that idea, correctly I think, proposing that, instead of valiantly attempting to resuscitate a flagging Sunday school program, the church ought to think of the whole of congregational life as the primary agency of education:

We must recognize that the congregation is a dynamic interaction of people that through worship (including sermon), program of activities, use of money, and allocation of leadership is an interpretation of Christianity. Second we must realize that the congregational interpretation of faith permeates the membership through natural channels of influence ...Third, we must acknowledge that, because the congregation is a community, teaching and learning are going on incessantly. This means we must constantly remind ourselves of the educational opportunities in all aspects of congregational life.²

Throughout the history of the Christian church, preaching has always contained a strong educational element and has been seen as the centerpiece of the church's education. Occasionally scholars, following the lead of C.H. Dodd, have attempted to take a scalpel to the New Testament and to separate the tissue of the *kerygma* (that is, the preaching) of the early church from the ligaments of the *didache* (the teaching). All such attempts, however, have failed, crashing on the actual practices of the early church, which do not support such an easy distinction. The earliest Christians apparently had their teaching all blended in with their preaching. They both announced and taught in the same breath, moving back and forth without sharp demarcation between narration of the kerygma and doctrinal and ethical reflection.

One way to put it is that teaching and kerygmatic proclamation are so intertwined in the preaching of the New Testament church that they either cannot tell the difference or don't need to do so. We can see this in the first chapter of Mark when Jesus is in the synagogue on the sabbath and encounters a man with an evil spirit (1:21-28). Jesus shouts at this spirit, commanding it to come out of the man, and the wicked thing comes slithering out, leaving the man in convulsions. The synagogue congregation watched all of this in astonishment, and we would think that their response would be, "What power!" or "What a miracle!" But, no, they exclaim instead, "What is this? A new *teaching*...!" Evidently, when Jesus is around it is very difficult to tell the difference between exorcism and education. In the gospel, the event of the kingdom is a teaching event, and, conversely, a gospel teaching is an event of the kingdom. Accordingly, from the beginning Christian preachers have known that eventful preaching has an educational dimension. In *On Christian Doctrine*, the very first homiletics text in Christian history, Augustine borrowed a line from the rhetorician Cicero when he claimed that the purposes of preaching were to *teach* (to provide essential doctrines and biblical content), to *delight* (to speak in imaginative and appealing ways), and to *persuade* (to open up avenues of conviction and ethical response to the gospel).

Augustine did not think that teaching, delighting, and persuading were three equal and independent goals; they were linked in a series. The ultimate purpose of

preaching is to persuade, to call people to belief and action in the name of Christ. The goal, then, is persuasion; the means is teaching the gospel clearly. Delight is the middle term, the bridge. The teaching of the gospel must be done in such a way that it touches the hearers at the deepest levels, in such a way as to delight them, or it will not be persuasive.

Viewed through this Augustinian lens, the problem with the preaching of a generation ago was not that it tried to teach, but the *way* in which it taught. First, the older didactic preaching tended to reduce the content of the Christian faith to a set of propositions. (Simplistic summaries of the gospel, such as “The Four Spiritual Laws” in use among campus evangelists, are actually caricatures of a widespread impulse in traditional Protestantism to abstract the kerygma into formulas, logically connected sets of truth claims.) There are, to be sure, ideas contained in the gospel, but there are also stories, skills, symbols, doxologies, laments, and countless other elements to learn. No one teaching style will suffice to convey the totality of the Christian gospel.

I was talking not long ago to a minister friend who found himself at the opening worship service of a clergy conference seated next to the man who, long ago, had been his systematic theology professor in seminary. The worship service included a sermon in which the preacher preached for a minute or so and then called upon the congregation to sing a stanza of a hymn. This was followed by a little more preaching, then another stanza, and so on, hymn and sermon continually interwoven. The preacher, well-intentioned, had a good idea and was attempting to be creative, but it was actually coming across as rather clumsy and gimmicky. In the middle of it, my friend leaned over to his former professor and quipped, “This is awful. It reminds me of what you once said of J.S. Whale’s old theological tome, *Christian Doctrine*, that every time Whale came upon a problem in theology he couldn’t solve he would quote a hymn.”

The old professor surprised my friend by forcefully replying, “I was *wrong* about that. I was a young professor and full of academic arrogance. I have since learned that there are some things in theology one can *only* say in hymns.” So it is with the teaching dimensions of preaching. There are some aspects of the gospel that can only be taught with a hymn, or a poem, or a story. No one method alone will do.

If the older didactic styles of preaching conceived the subject matter of the gospel too narrowly, they also often taught woodenly. Preachers employed hortatory techniques and turned sanctuaries into debate halls. Sermons often became laden with argument and spent time crawling tediously around the intricacies of theological systems. Such sermons sank into the stomachs of congregations like the heavy syrup-smothered pancakes at a men’s association breakfast.

The last twenty years in homiletical thought can be seen, then, as a reaction, a correction, a recovery of delight. It has been an exciting and a necessary time of experimentation, and its benefits will endure. Because of the fresh air let into the room by the newer homiletics, sermons for the foreseeable future will thankfully be more storied, more dynamic in structure, more image rich, more communicationally interactive. The problem, however, with a correction is that it threatens to become the main theme. In the rush to create delight, we can easily forget the need to teach, on the one hand, and the goal of persuasion, on the other. The temptation is for sermons to become like Windham Hill music beautiful, lilting, moody, but not the least assertive and with absolutely nothing to teach — and, thus, to measure sermon effectiveness by counting tears rather than by observing insightful obedience by congregations.

Augustine reminds us, then, that delight is fastened on either side to other homiletical demands. Delight without content is episodic; delight without persuasion is aimless. Even so, Augustine's helpful summary — to teach, to delight, and to persuade — is not the full picture. What is missing from the equation is a concept of the church. Preachers are not simply teaching, delighting, and persuading discrete individuals; they are building up a community of faith. As Moltmann puts it:

The proclamation of the gospel always belongs within a community, for every language lives in a community or creates one.

...The fellowship which corresponds to the gospel in its original interpretation is the messianic community. ...It is a 'story-telling fellowship,' which continually wins its own freedom from the stories and myths of the society in which it lives, from the present realization of this story of Christ.³

The Many Forms of Teaching

When we think about restoring the teaching dimension to preaching, many possibilities occur. First, the reading of Scripture, unfortunately a liturgical low point in many places, can be educationally rehabilitated. Many people in the pews simply lack enough biblical knowledge to place biblical texts into any meaningful context and, thus, listen to Scripture episodically. Just a touch of teaching at the beginning of the reading, placing the text into its literary and historical environment, can go a long way toward equipping the congregation for informed discipleship.

Perhaps the toughest teaching task, however, is the doctrinal one. As we have argued, the essential vocabulary of the faith has, for many Christians, vanished, nosed out by the language of psychology or corporate management. Many Christians have simply lost their voices, unable to use in any meaningful sense the language of grace, hope, or salvation. These great concepts, and others like them in the lexicon of the Christian faith, once part of a powerful public language necessary for full human description, have either been forgotten or demoted to signifiers of inner states of individual piety.

George Lindbeck's provocative essay, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, suggests two broad ways in which doctrine has been conceived, to which Lindbeck adds a third alternative. First, there is the *cognitive* approach in which doctrines function as objective truth claims. In this approach, if two people disagree theologically, at least one of them must be wrong, since doctrine is an attempt to state the truth of the matter. Second, there is the *experiential-expressive* approach in which doctrines function as linguistic expressions of feelings, attitudes, or experiences. In this approach, if two people disagree theologically, they may simply view their disagreement as the result of different ways of describing a common religious experience. For example, Baptists, Lutherans, and Muslims all have experiences of being saved, redeemed, or rescued by the divine; they just talk about it in different language and with different symbols. Finally, there is Lindbeck's own contribution, the "cultural linguistic" approach to doctrine in which doctrines function as rules guiding a community of faith in its speaking, thinking, and acting.⁴

So far, the congregational approach to education we have been advocating is closer to Lindbeck's "cultural linguistic" approach than to the other two. Indeed, Lindbeck maintains that "the proclamation of the gospel, as a Christian would put it, may be first of all the telling of the story, but this gains power and meaning insofar

as it is embodied in the total gestalt of community life and action.”⁵ At the risk, though, of blurring Lindbeck’s methodological precision, I would like to suggest that his three doctrinal categories are not mutually exclusive and that each of them points to a different style of pulpit teaching, all of them needed:

1) Cognitive — There are some claims that the Christian faith makes that Christians believe to be objectively true and nonnegotiable. For example, Christians believe that there is but one God, not many gods, and most Christians would not be willing to budge on that claim. Though one might quibble here and there and certainly might have some queasiness about the masculine language involved, an ancient creedal formula like the Apostles’ Creed could well be seen to represent a summary of the basic cognitive claims of historic Christianity. Congregations need to know those claims, need to understand the vocabulary in which they are expressed, need to know what is at stake in them, and need to possess the skill of using them intelligently. The once common practice of devoting a series of sermons to the principal phrases of the creed, then, looks like an old idea whose time has come again.

2) Experiential-Expressive — The whole “delight” era in homiletics has equipped us well to teach in this way, since this approach demands that stories of human experience be presented. There is a bit of twist, though, since, in order to teach doctrine, the goal of telling experiential stories is not to produce a gasp, a tear, or a feeling, but rather to name moments in human life *theologically*. Such a strategy is not aimed simply at pointing to theologically infused moments in other people’s experience, but in providing a dress rehearsal for the hearers to be able to give theological voice to their own moments of depth and insight.

3) Cultural-Linguistic — This approach, as described by Lindbeck, might take a doctrine like the inspiration of the Scripture and demonstrate that it works not primarily to make a claim about the intrinsic nature of the Bible, but rather as a guideline for how the Bible is used in the Christian community.

Perhaps even more valuable, though, would be for the preacher to exegete, along with the biblical text for the day, one or more of the practices of the church. Why do we baptize in the manner we do? What does it mean that we “pass the peace” in worship? Why does the church make statements on matters of public policy? What is the meaning of having a homeless shelter in the fellowship hall? Standing behind each of these practices is not merely an attitude, but a history of scriptural exegesis and theological reflection. Many folks in the pews have no more idea why the church does certain things than a visitor from Laos to Yankee Stadium would have about why that right fielder let the fly ball plop at his feet. To bring to the surface some of the complex interaction among Bible, theology, ecclesial tradition, and current context that makes up any practice of the church is to provide training in a skill necessary for growth in faith and for Christian discipleship.

Looking Ahead

No one knows for sure what will happen to the church in the coming decades. Some think that we have bottomed out in terms of membership loss, that the aging baby boomers are maturing and hungering for the church once more, and that a new phase of church growth is just around the corner. Others believe that the cultural rejection of the church and the shaking of the ecclesiastical foundations is just now beginning in earnest and that the worst is yet to come. Whichever account turns out to be accurate, it is clear that the easy alliance between the church and the larger

culture is over. In the coming decades, Christian congregations, whether they be larger or smaller, will be more self-consciously Christian, more intentionally an alternative to the larger culture. That means that every resource of the church will need to be pressed into the task of education. The vision is congregations who can see the world through the lens of the gospel and thereby act in ways that bear witness to the redemptive power of God. If so, the culture around us may, from time to time, exclaim in astonishment, “What is this? A new teaching!”

NOTES

¹ C. Ellis Nelson, *How Faith Matures* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 18.

² *Ibid.*, 199.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 225.

⁴ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 14-19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.