

Preaching on Paul

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In a recent book Robert Jewett relates that he and his wife for a time gave up their regular church obligations and visited other congregations—mostly Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational—to participate in worship and to gain a sense of what theological and biblical resources were most widely used. His first and major impression was the scarcity of preaching on Paul.¹ Conversations with ministers and seminary students, with the notable exception of Lutherans, generally confirm Jewett's conclusion. The Pauline letters are simply not favorite texts for sermons these days. With a kind of Marcionism-in-reverse, Paul gets relegated to the periphery of the preaching canon, pulled out for Reformation Sunday or weddings (1 Corinthians 13) or funerals (Romans 8).

Why? Probably there are as many reasons as there are non-Pauline preachers. For one thing, Paul is hard going. His style of communication is dense, his logic is often carried by an unusual use of Old Testament citations, and the translation of all this into the idiom and life of a contemporary congregation is frankly difficult. Slugging through the complex theological argument of Romans 1-11 is no small task. For another thing, Paul's direct speech is often more than we want to tackle. "You foolish Galatians!" and "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!" seem to come from a hotheaded, cocksure theologian, whose pastoral style is suspect. We are far more comfortable with those who are less sure or who at least convey the answers in an indirect way.

Furthermore, preaching on narratives is "in," and Paul is a writer of letters. Retelling the story of the hemorrhaging woman who touched Jesus' coat or the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel offers a more ready access to the experiences of our people than unpacking the debate over circumcision in Galatia. "In the beginning was the story."

Perhaps most significant of all, Paul's message is hard to take. For example, he writes about suffering not as a tragic riddle to be solved or a reason for rage against God, but as an anticipated component of Christian experience (e.g., Phil. 1:29-30; Rom. 8:36; 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 4:7-15). In Paul's way of thinking, taking strategies to avoid persecution characterizes those who are *opponents* of the gospel (e.g., Gal. 6:12), hardly a welcomed word for the painless Christianity of the North American church.

What then do we do with the letters of Paul? Ignoring them is admittedly one option, but we do so at our own peril. Paul was the defense attorney for the Gentiles, who were outside the religious establishment of the early church and who were on occasion treated as mere stepchildren in the family of God. But the situation has changed. Nowadays the Gentiles are the insiders (the *real* daughters and sons), and it is easy for them to forget whence they came—unless Paul reminds them. It is easy to erase the memory of being abandoned at the family night suppers (Gal. 2:11-14), and as the latter-day insiders it is easy to repeat the offense toward those who now live on the margins of the community.

Ernst Käsemann, who worried much about the church's domestication of Paul, wrote, "The church continues to preserve his [Paul's] letters in her canon and thereby latently preserves her own crisis. She cannot get away from the one who for the most part only disturbs her. For he remains even for her the apostle of the heathen; the pious still hardly know what to make of him. For that very reason his central message is the voice of a preacher in the wilderness, even in Protestant Christianity."²

How, practically speaking, can we modern preachers let the voice of this "preacher of the wilderness" be heard in our congregations? Here are four reflections on the task. First, for preachers wedded to narratives, the Pauline letters are full of them. Galatians begins with a long autobiographical section in which we hear the story of Paul's own transformation by the gospel, confirmed by the Christians in the Judean churches (Gal. 1:13-24; see also Phil. 3:4-11); the story of Paul's encounter with the pillar apostles in Jerusalem, including the intriguing subsidiary plot about the "false believers" who wanted to force the circumcision of Titus (2:1-10); and the story of the conflict over table fellowship between Paul and Peter at Antioch, which became quite an embarrassment to the church fathers (2:11-14). Usually analyzed by the commentators in order to reconstruct the history of the early church, these narratives are in fact recounted not to leave a record for inquisitive minds with a historical bent, but to persuade the projected readers to embrace a gospel of free grace.

In 2 Cor. 12:1-10 Paul narrates his struggle with the thorn in the flesh, Satan's messenger sent to harass him, and reports God's answer to his plea for relief. It is itself a story told as a piece of a larger plot involving Paul's defense against charges brought by the "false apostles" (2 Cor. 10-13). The letter to Philemon relates a marvelous account of a runaway slave and his return, a story that leaves the reader in some suspense about how it all turned out.³ While the narrative of Philemon is more up-front and more easily plotted than the narratives of the other letters, all of Paul's writings are embedded in an extended give-and-take between writer and implied readers and invite the creative retelling by modern storytellers.

One thing about Paul's narratives: they are overtly theological and rhetorical. In the autobiographical sections of Galatians, the point is neither to weave a spellbinding tale nor to inform readers of information that they may not otherwise know. The standoff between Peter and Paul at Antioch, for example, is unambiguously told from Paul's vantage point. It seems unfair that Peter is not given a voice to defend his actions. But that becomes a mute point when we discover that the intent (as expressed in the context and in the ensuing paragraph) is not to give an unbiased account of an event, but to convince readers of the singularity and power of the gospel.⁴

While the letters contain numerous stories, it has to be acknowledged that the overt theological intent and the more direct style of the letter-form often do not allow for the more subtle readings possible in an extended plot like that found in the Gospels. A continuous narrative poses interesting juxtapositions of incidents and overlapping of stories, which richly contribute to its meaning,⁵ and are not normally available in letters.

In addition to stories, the letters are replete with wonderful metaphors that merely await homiletical exploitation. Creation's "groaning" like an expectant mother's labor pains and prayer in the Spirit as "inarticulate groans" (Rom. 8:19-27) are as picturesque a way as one could imagine of depicting our human predicament and our intercessory relationship to it. The law has functioned like a *paidagogos*, the slave in

charge of the child's manners who escorts him to and from the school (Gal. 3:24). The church is spoken of as a family, a body, a building, an olive tree, and on and on.

Second, preaching the letters is unquestionably demanding, more so than preaching the Gospels. For example, the intricate way Paul's argument unfolds in Galatians and the issue it addresses require careful attention from the preacher in preparing the sermon. Otherwise, it is easy to fall into the trap of abstracting a theological theme from the text and of preaching it without any consideration of its context and rhetorical intent.⁶

Galatians has often become the basis for a sermon that reaffirms the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, but gives no consideration to the issue of Jews and Gentiles, which issue in fact dominates the letter. The agitators against whom Paul writes are uncritically assumed to be advocating a salvation by works—an assumption highly suspect⁷—and as a result the sermon pleads for “an acceptance of ourselves despite our unacceptability” instead of frantically striving to earn God's favor by good deeds. The trouble with the sermon is that it misses the critical issue of Galatians and in doing so avoids the agonizingly relevant matter of pluralism in the church.⁸

Paul's letters are attempts to persuade, and an essential step in preparing to preach from a letter entails gaining clarity about the “what” and the “how” of the attempted persuasion. Apparently the readers of Galatians were faced with teachers who, on the basis of scriptural arguments, advocated circumcision and the observance of food laws and special days as the essential marks that identified the people of God. The teachers did not assume that the keeping of these traditions won God over from estrangement. They recognized themselves as people with whom God had taken a gracious initiative in establishing a covenant, but the observance of these rites marked them as God's peculiar people. They functioned as badges of identity.

The letter then is written to Gentile believers to convince them that the gospel is about the crucified Christ, who alone defines the people of God. He establishes a new creation, making circumcision irrelevant. The teachers' efforts to impose the Jewish heritage on the Galatians turns out to be an act of cultural imperialism. Instead, projected readers are urged to reaffirm “the truth of the gospel” (2:5, 14) as the one and only bond of unity.

A sermon on Galatians needs to take this rhetorical intention seriously and to respect the theological movement in the argument of the letter both before and after the text isolated for preaching. In fact, the most profitable use of Paul in preaching may come in a series of two or three sermons from a single letter, which affords the congregation an opportunity to become familiar with its particular purpose.

Third, Paul's letters are written to shape the minds, intuitions, and sensitivities of congregations. In most cases, from visits of mutual friends and/or from letters Paul hears about the life and trials of a congregation (or collection of house churches) and sends a letter as a surrogate visit in order to be present in the midst of the community. This means that the letters are not in the first place targeted for individuals, but for a corporate audience. They are written in such a way as to anticipate an oral reading at a meeting of the community. Even the letter to Philemon, the only one of the undisputed letters of Paul bearing an individual's name, is addressed to a group (“to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house”). Individuals are occasionally singled out, but always as a part of the larger community (so Euodia and Syntyche in Phil. 4:2-3).

A prime example of the communal orientation of the letters occurs in connection with the incident of incest in the Corinthian congregation, where a man is living with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1-13). Rather than addressing the guilty party, the text chides the congregation for its arrogance, its boasting, and its failure to mourn. Paul calls for a new, communal self-understanding in which readers view themselves differently—as an unleavened community that demonstrates honesty and dependability and as a community for whom the paschal lamb has been sacrificed.

The writings of Paul invite preaching that speaks to the life of communities. With modern congregations that think first individually and only later (if at all) corporately, this becomes a difficult assignment. “Preacher, you were really speaking to *me* today” is usually offered as the supreme compliment. What if even our pastoral preaching were aimed not so much at the grieving individual but at molding a community that “rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep”? What if the sermon on Paul’s exhortation to be “transformed by the renewal of your mind” suggested congregational rather than individual renewal?

To recognize that Paul’s letters were addressed to congregations means also that they were not addressed to the broader culture, to the Greco-Roman environment. Paul dealt with some (but certainly not all) of the social problems of the day, but did so by calling the community to account, by challenging it to evidence in its own life characteristics of a redeemed community. Rather than condemning the society for the despicable way it treated women, Paul declared the church to be a baptized community in which gender distinctions were no longer decisive (Gal. 3:26-28). Instead of attacking the institution of slavery, he urged the church in Philemon’s house to welcome back Onesimus “no longer as a slave but more than a slave as a brother...both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Phlm. 16).⁹ There is no retreat from the world in the Pauline letters, but a clear mandate that the church through its own life be a subversive community in the broader society. The letters provide a biblical warrant for Stanley Hauerwas’s oft-quoted dictum, “The church doesn’t have a social strategy; the church is a social strategy.”¹⁰

For the preacher this often means asking different questions of the biblical text—communal rather than individual questions. Where is my congregation in this passage? How does this text build up the people of God for mission in the world? The sermon in turn can provide the congregation with a fresh way, with a new language, to understand its common life and activities—baptism, the Lord’s Supper, building programs, outreach projects.

Walter Brueggemann writes of this dimension of preaching as constructing “an evangelical infrastructure” that makes communal life possible.

I use the term “infrastructure” to refer to the system or network of signs and gestures that make social relationships possible, significant, and effective. The social infrastructure is the almost invisible system of connections that gives life functioning power and provides connections and support systems. I take it that the most elemental human infrastructure is a network of stories, sacraments, and signs that give a certain nuance, shape, and possibility to human interaction. An evangelical infrastructure is one that mediates and operates in ways that heal, redeem, and transform.¹¹

Building such an infrastructure does not happen overnight, but comes only through the slow and deliberate visiting and revisiting of biblical texts.

Fourth, though Paul's writings are letters and not sermons, they nevertheless provide an interesting model for dealing with the personal experience of the preacher in sermons.¹² Many preachers have been bred on a neoorthodoxy that frowns on using their own story as a part of proclaiming the gospel. At the same time, many in our current theological climate insist that our personal stories are the prime medium for communicating the gospel. For both, Paul may be informative.

Somewhat sparingly, Paul refers to his own life experience, but always in a distinctive way. The telling of his own story is subordinated to the story of Christ. William Beardslee comments,

The story which orients Paul's life, the story of Christ, is one which continually challenges the continuity of Paul's own life-story, by presenting him with the challenge of power-in-weakness through the symbol of the cross. We should also note that in contrast to many modern tellers of their own story, Paul's ordering myth is not a personal one, but a universal story; *his telling about himself is a way, not of inviting others to do their own thing, but of inviting his hearers to share this universal story, the story of Christ.*¹³

To put this another way, Paul most often tells of his weaknesses, of his inability to cope, in order to testify to the power of the gospel. His "fool's speech" in 2 Cor. 11:16-12:10 is a good example. The hardships of Paul's ministry listed in 11:23-29 would be understood by the "false apostles" in Corinth not as signs of bravery but as indications of failure, as would his unwillingness to stand eyeball-to-eyeball with the governor of Damascus (11:30-33). He follows this with what must have been a humiliating admission that the thorn in the flesh was sent him because he was unable to handle the visionary experiences given him earlier. (Twice he says the thorn came "to keep me from being too elated," 12:7). These confessions (with the repeatedly ironic use of "boast") are not personal disclosures to enable readers to get to know him better, but are testimonies to the power of Christ (12:9-10). Their reporting becomes an invitation to the audience to discern the same divine power operative in their personal weaknesses.

Too much personal experience from the pulpit obviously becomes hard for the congregation to take, but Paul encourages the more timid among us to draw on our personal stories—if and when they can be the means for others to discover how God can and does work in their lives.

No biblical writer has influenced Protestant churches through the years so much as Paul has—sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. Unquestionably, his letters contain things "hard to understand" and are subject to being twisted and distorted by "the ignorant and the unstable," but so are the rest of the scriptures (2 Pet. 3:16). Paul's letters are demanding reading and, when understood, make demands on readers. But they also retain the power to transform both communities and individuals. The North American church needs to hear them preached.¹⁴

NOTES

¹ Robert Jewett, *Paul The Apostle to America: Cultural Trends and Pauline Scholarship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 13-14.

² Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 250.

³ See the careful plotting of the Philemon story in Norman R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

⁴ See Beverly R. Gaventa, "Galatians 1 and 2: Autobiography as Paradigm," *NovT* 28 (1986): 309-326.

⁵ In addition to the approach outlined here, see also the work of Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983), who focuses on the story of Christ in the text of Galatians; and N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), who extends the story in Paul to include Israel as well.

⁶ See Leander Keck, "Romans in the Pulpit: Form and Formation in Romans 5:1-11," in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred Craddock*, ed. Gail R. O'Day and Thomas G. Long (Nashville: Abingdon: 1993), 77-90. Keck writes, "Paul's point is in the sentences that relate concepts in a particular way. What needs to be preached more often is what these sentences actually assert, rather than the themes they reflect. That is, preaching should reflect the syntactical and rhetorical details of Paul's letter and not content itself with theological generalities" (90).

⁷ See especially, Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) and E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

⁸ See the interesting application of the Jew-Gentile issue by Jeffrey S. Siker, "How to Decide? Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion," *TheoToday* 51(1994): 219-234.

⁹ One of the weaknesses of Jewett's book (see note 1) is that Paul is made to dialogue with American culture rather with the American church.

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 43.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 26-27.

¹² David Bartlett ("Texts Shaping Sermons," in *Listening to the Word*, 159) mentions the matter of Paul's use of his experience, but does not develop it.

¹³ William A. Beardslee, "Narrative Form in the New Testament and Process Theology," *Encounter* 36 (1975): 306-307 (italics mine).

¹⁴ For stimulating conversations and for many ideas on the theme of this article, I am greatly indebted to my colleague Charles Campbell and to members of a class we have co-taught.