

New Doctrinal Preaching for a New Century

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An elderly lifelong member of my denomination once made an impassioned argument for reincarnation. It was, she insisted, a basic doctrine, not only of the church, but of the Bible itself. My response had little, if any, impact on her view.¹

Many clergy could cite their own experience of contemporary doctrinal aberrations. For reasons far too numerous and complicated to suggest here, doctrinal clarity has been and continues to be on the decline among laity, at least in the major denominations of North America. Along with the decline of biblical literacy, and not coincidentally, we are witnessing the demise of lay theological acumen.

The church is newly challenged with the task of nurturing lay theological formation. That task entails a vast array of congregational programs and enterprises. But a new doctrinal preaching holds promise for our response to this challenge. The sermon is increasingly the major opportunity clergy have to address theology in the presence of our congregations. Sunday morning worship seems more and more the only congregational activity in which many laity participate. Bible studies are often poorly attended; at times new member classes condensed in an effort not to discourage potential members; catechetical processes gutted of significant theological content. The sermon is becoming a precious teaching moment for doctrinal substance.

However, contemporary homiletical methods have unintentionally moved preachers away from teaching doctrine in the sermon. While those methods will become progressively more significant in communicating with listeners in a postmodern age, they have often been interpreted in ways that diminish the role of teaching in general² and theological reflection in particular. Some clergy seem to believe that doctrinal preaching is a homiletical Edsel that violates the principles contemporary homileticians advocate. In one sense, of course, they are correct. Doctrinal sermons in the mode of the 1950s are likely to deafen a congregation within the first two minutes! But there is an alternative.

In this brief article, I propose that we find new ways of nurturing doctrine through preaching, while continuing to value the contributions of the "new homiletic." Theologically shallow sermons, I believe, are not the necessary result of practicing newer skills in communication. Here I can only suggest a number of the essential characteristics of what might comprise an effective doctrinal preaching and aid us in responding to the challenge of the next century. By "doctrine" I mean only a discrete theological theme. The word is not intended to denote simply the great dogmas of the church, although those are essential to the task.

Some Assumptions of a New Doctrinal Preaching:

Before addressing the specific features of preaching doctrine for the ensuing century, however, we need to consider several assumptions that give rise to the homiletic qualities this article advocates.

The first assumption is a cultural one. In the near future, we ourselves as well as our listeners will continue to struggle with the fragmentation of our lives. Life will continue to be experienced in isolated bits and pieces, few of which inherently cohere

to yield a sense of wholeness. The unraveling of holism is a common phenomenon of modern life in North America. Family life has been severed from the connection it once had with labor. Where once the church was the center of community, it is now marginalized, and laity must grapple with how their faith relates to their work. Fragmentation has become a way of life for many of us and is likely to be intensified in decades to come.

Perhaps more basic in this process of fragmentation is the fact that our ways of receiving information—indeed, our senses themselves—are being transformed as a result of contemporary media. We learn in little scraps, such as the television commercial. The television bombards us daily with thousands of disparate images and messages. The computer internet provides bits and pieces, and the browser at best networks information from numerous sources. It has been said that contemporary illiteracy entails not the inability to read, but the ineptitude to read and comprehend lengthy, whole texts.

Generally, then, our lives are shredded into tiny pieces. Each individual experience is sequestered from others. If we are to find some meaningful wholeness to life, it will come only as we are able to identify connections. Fragmentation spawns meaninglessness, and meaningfulness requires discovery of an experiential holism.³ If anything, postmodernism promises to make such discoveries more and more difficult.

The second assumption is a theological one: Doctrine is a means of constructing frameworks for experience. Religion in general seeks to discover and articulate metanarratives that hold our individual stories together. Theological reflection invites imaginative constructs of connections among disparate experiences. I doubt, however, that prepackaged doctrine will satisfy twenty-first century listeners. Quite to the contrary, the church's traditional doctrines seem, to a good many Christians, still another fragment in their lives, unrelated and even irrelevant to other chunks of experience. Theological frameworks for human lives will be nurtured only as they are constructed through imaginative new theological language and metaphors.

A third assumption has to do with biblical preaching. Theological superficiality may arise more from the preacher's cursory study of the biblical text than from well-intended efforts to remain faithful to new homiletical theory. A new doctrinal preaching will be biblical preaching! The text is invariably theological, so that faithful preaching of the text is itself theological. The text's theology is crucial for any new doctrinal preaching.

A final assumption has to do with the role of clergy in the congregation. Like it or not, a congregation's pastor is its resident theologian. Clergy remain the primary source of guidance in constructing connections between Christian faith and secular life. Pastors-preachers are asked to interpret congregations' experience in terms of Christian doctrine and point the way toward a possible unity in life's brokenness. This makes clergy "local theologians."⁴ Our theological task is to bring Christian thought into dialog with the specific experiences of a congregation's life and the individual lives of its members. The specificity of our listeners' lives is the beginning point for the theology done in the sermon, as it is in all forms of pastoral ministry. Theology begins in the local situation and addresses that situation with all of its concreteness and historicity.

Characteristics of a New Doctrinal Preaching:

These four assumptions suggest that preaching doctrine for the next century will have certain features. Effective doctrinal preaching in the century close upon us will need to exhibit at least these characteristics.

First, *the experiential roots of doctrine* are the crucial element in nurturing theological reflection through preaching. For far too many of us—laity and clergy alike—traditional doctrine has been endowed with an abstract life of its own. Theology is too often conceived as a theoretical, cognitive game played by the gifted without much regard to the real, visceral relevance of the sport. Among many of the laity, doctrine is viewed as what they are supposed to believe, not what their own experience leads them to believe. Doctrinal orientation seems of little importance among many laity. Witness, for instance, the way in which contemporary North Americans often choose their congregation without much attention to denominational affiliation. That the corner church is Presbyterian, Lutheran, or United Methodist matters far less than its youth program, Sunday School, or contemporary music.

Consequently, effective doctrinal preaching will have to name the congregation's experience in relation to theological themes. Theology has become irrelevant for laity in part because they have not been helped to find the linkage between their real lives and doctrine. For instance, dissertations on the appearances of the risen Christ will accomplish little, unless the contemporary divine presence can be illumined by real human experiences of the transcendent potential of relationships. When a human relationship can be named an epiphany, the doctrine of the living Christ becomes a live option for the listener's consciousness, and doctrine couples with life.

Such a practice refocuses the experience itself, even as it names the theological lens through which one may read the experience. Of course, we risk trivializing a theological theme every time we name it within the sphere of human experience. We take that risk seriously, but venture identifying the connections in the conviction that, only by doing so, do we help our listeners discern the theological possibilities of their lives.

In this sense, preaching that nurtures lay theological reflection returns to the biblical origins of doctrine in the community's shared experience. Just as the biblical theologies arose from their communities' real experiences, preachers enable congregations to find doctrinal roots in their lives. But this first feature of preaching doctrine is entangled with the second.

Preaching doctrine will avail itself of *the creative power of language*. Thanks to several trends in the later half of this century, language has come to be recognized as something far more significant than an arbitrary association of signified and signifier. Thinking itself is linguistic. Speaking creates new reality. Naming does not simply conveniently package reality; it reforms reality into something new. Language is endowed with power to create what is spoken.

Hence, the languaging of cherished traditional doctrines in relationship with our experience does more than provide new labels. It actually recreates our consciousness of experience and reformulates doctrine itself. The preacher's words are imbued with a power to recreate the listeners' reality. By speaking the congregation's common experience, that experience is reshaped; by naming a doctrine in relationship with that experience, the preacher creates a new doctrinal reality.

So, for instance, to name a feature of a human relationship as divine epiphany

creates a new experience. It transforms the consciousness of that relationship into something new. At the same time, a theological concept is made new. The risen Christ becomes a possibility for human life today.

But that means, third, that *effective preaching of doctrine relanguages tradition*.⁵ What has been said of the recreation of doctrine through speaking does not imply that tradition is rendered obsolete. Christian theology is always traditional, even when it opposes tradition. But it will be fruitless simply to recite traditional doctrine to a postmodernist congregation.

Hence, preachers are called upon to relanguage tradition for the sake of contemporary listeners. That means finding new words, new images, new metaphors for ancient beliefs. We witness that process underway among a number of contemporary theologians, most prominently feminists and womanists. So, for example, the traditional theories of atonement we all learned in seminary will need to be rethought and (more importantly) relanguaged.⁶ Such relanguaging of our heritage will require knowing the tradition inside out. But knowing that, how do we reimage the heart of the atonement for our age? Is there yet a precious jewel hidden in a substitutionary theory of atonement—one that continues to be linked with contemporary life? How might the power of language unearth that jewel?

Fourth, *theology itself will increasingly be comprised of collages of images*. I assume that theology has always been metaphorical in nature. Our doctrines are ways of speaking the unspeakable with human language and experience. More and more doctrine is being conceived as images—word-pictures—that represent the faith community's shared experience. Nowhere else is this more evident than in our God-language. Each word we use for the Transcendent Reality is a miniature metaphor by which we speak the unspeakable.

Theology, then, is comprised of collections of images—a collage, if you will, of word-pictures of what may be. The framework for life we seek to nurture is not, I believe, so much a massive abstraction residing in some realm beyond our reach as it is a photomontage of the deeper dimensions of human existence. Preachers fashion those images as they relanguage tradition in ways that provide lenses for experience. In other words, we empower listeners to interpret their lives through metaphors that make sense of the senseless and integrate the ruptured.

The fifth characteristic of preaching doctrine in the next century arises from the suggestion that theology is metaphorical. Story is a kind of image—a motion picture instead of a still shot. *Story continues to function at the heart of theology, but preachers will need to ignite the listeners' reflections on story*. The use of story in preaching is laudable for reasons that have been stated many times over. But in common practice preachers may have abdicated their responsibility to facilitate listeners' reflection on sermon stories. The abdication has often taken two opposite forms. In the one, the story is reduced to a simple lesson, stated propositionally. "This story means ..." is a way of closing a story and of tethering its power. The opposite practice is equally faulty. Stories are told without any comment whatsoever. Out of respect for a story's own power and integrity, preachers tell the story and abandon listeners to discern for themselves its relationship with their experience.⁷

Theological reflection on story is something quite different. It is neither the articulation of a story's moral in a proposition, nor the practice of deserting listeners in the wild sea of their own thoughts about a story in relation to their lives. Theological

reflection on story poses possibilities for the relationship of a story to both the preacher's and listener's lives. It wonders about a tale, raising questions about its "meaning." It makes suggestions for the direction of theological thought rather than dictating it. It conjures a number of paths for listeners to explore, honoring their freedom to find helpful doctrinal images in a story.

Theological reflection on story in our sermons is necessary for one simple reason. Many of our listeners are ill-equipped to do so without some help. This has nothing to do with their intelligence. The fact is that most of us have never been trained to think about an ordinary story in terms of Christian faith and practice. This leads us to the final feature of theological preaching for a new century.

Preachers *model theological reflection in their sermons in order to nurture the listeners' own skills in such reflection*. The sermon may be the only explicit theological discourse listeners will hear in their normal week. Our theological reflection on experience can show them how Christians might interpret life's experiences for themselves. Hence, what we say ought to be a kind of prototype they can modify for their own thought. From our modeling of theological reflection, listeners gradually develop their own hermeneutic for reading their lives.

This feature of doctrinal preaching suggests our goal. That goal is not to be the conduit through which information about the church's dogma is transmitted to others. Our goal is to nurture lay theological reflection by embodying conversation between traditional doctrine and contemporary existence. We foster a discipleship that includes thinking about life in terms of new images for God, Christ, salvation, and morality. Through our modeling we invite the priesthood of all believers, encouraging our listeners to take up their role as theologians.⁸

The proposals offered here are, to be sure, minimal. But they may suggest a path by which doctrinal preaching might reclaim a place within our ministries and do so in ways consistent with contemporary homiletical theory. Teamed with other forms of ministry, preaching that nurtures lay theological reflection begins to address the frightful demise of sound doctrine in our congregations.

Notes

¹This article is a summary of parts of a forthcoming book I co-authored with Robert G. Hughes, *Preaching Doctrine for a New Century* (Fortress).

² But see Ronald J. Allen, *The Teaching Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

³ See Thomas H. Naylor, William H. Willimon, and Magdalena R. Naylor, *The Search for Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

⁴ See Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985) as well as Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, "Ways of Knowing and Forms of Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* 19 (Pentecost, 1996): 30-36 and *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

⁵ See Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), especially 126.

⁶ For example, Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), especially 161-167, and Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

⁷ Some of the relevant literature includes Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-literate Age* (Lima: C.S.S., 1993); Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*, rev. ed. (Durham: Labyrinth, 1992), especially 22-25 and 89-90; and Richard L. Eslinger, "Narrative and Imagery," *Intersections: Post-Critical Studies in Preaching*, ed. Richard L. Eslinger

(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 69-70.

⁸Two important books on lay theological reflection are John B. Cobb, Jr., *Becoming a Thinking Christian* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), and Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).