

Overcoming Pentecost in Our Preaching: Proclamation Without Spirit

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“Why do I hear so little about the Holy Spirit at Duke Chapel?” a layperson asked. He noted how seldom the Holy Spirit had appeared in my preaching. Because this man is a layperson, a professor of chemistry, and voted for Bush, how was I to explain to him what I now explain to you? I will tell you, dear fellow preachers, what I could not tell him in his low, lay status.

The risks and pitfalls of working with the Holy Spirit are so great that it is better, in our preaching, to work alone!¹ It is better not to pray the “Prayer for Illumination,” the “Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit so that as the Scriptures are read and proclaimed, we may hear what you say to us today.” This petition, often requested, and in my experience, seldom fulfilled, is an invitation to trouble. The Holy Spirit, in my dealings with him, or her, tends to be pushy, assertive, antagonistic, and imperialistic. It is the nature of the Holy Spirit to want to take over wherever he, or she, intrudes. The Holy Spirit seems to abhor a vacuum, and frankly, many churches on Sunday morning are vacuous.

“Why do we follow an Order of Worship, or read from a bulletin on Sunday morning in our worship?” a lay person asked. Of course, because she was a layperson, I had little way to explain to her the plain facts: We need to keep all of the empty spaces filled—keep talking, keep people going through the motions, keep their noses in the bulletins—in order that there be a minimum of open space, gaps, or “dead air,” as people in television put it. Such gaps and spaces are but invitations for the Holy Spirit to push into our liturgy. If that happens, it is difficult to predict where we might be by noon. And we preachers have a solemn duty always to stay with the flow, to assure our congregations that a chief pastoral role is to protect them from unwarranted, potentially divisive intrusions of the Divine.

I have seen otherwise contained and cautious congregations get loose, lurch to the left, even begin to shout, stamp their feet, and throw all caution to the wind at the instigation of the Holy Spirit. I do not have to tell you experienced pastors why this sort of thing is to be avoided. Control is one of the chief functions of clergy. And the Holy Spirit likes nothing better than to take a perfectly decent and decorous Service of Worship and transform it into some sort of heart-happy out of control hootenanny. If congregations cannot trust their pastors to protect them from the Holy Spirit, whom can they trust?²

Each spring semester, it is my custom to teach a course at Duke Divinity School entitled, “The Rhetoric of Preaching.” The course begins with a perusal of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and continues with a semester long exploration of rhetorical devices, techniques, and procedures. Aristotle clearly sets the agenda for the course in his magnificent treatment of persuasive speaking. We study the forms of speech, the way speeches ought to be tailored to fit the needs and the limitations of certain audiences, the methods for fitting the proper means of speech with the argument, and so forth.

Toward the end of this course last year, a student asked an impudent question:

“Why haven’t we considered the Holy Spirit’s role in preaching?”

One gets this sort of question from time to time from young seminarians. The under thirty crowd tends toward the spiritual. I patiently explained to the student that this was the reason Aristotle’s thought on rhetoric had dominated the course. Aristotle did not believe in a God who acts and speaks. Therefore, he brilliantly devised not only the first systematic rhetoric, but also a rhetoric that enabled preachers to make our point without needing any help from God. Aristotle clearly shows that if we use the proper technique, the right argument, a skillful analysis of the audience, we will not need to ask for outside help. Because most of us tend toward Deism anyway, we must have a rhetoric suited to a God who no longer says anything to us. Therefore we must take matters in hand and speak to, and for, ourselves. Thus, my omission of the Holy Spirit from a course in homiletics.³

“This course is training in how to preach in such a way that one might preach so well, so skillfully and effectively, that one will not need God to make it work,” I told them.

After giving this matter much consideration, and without groveling for any external inspiration (no pun intended), I now offer these guidelines for my fellow preachers who wish to preach without risking intrusions by the Holy Spirit:

1. *Use historical criticism in studying the Scripture for preaching.*

Everybody knows that the historical critical method has proved to be exceedingly useful in defining, categorizing, reducing, and defusing certain troubling biblical texts. In the hands of the Jesus Seminar, it has exceeded beautifully in even eliminating troublesome texts. In my estimation, when one considers the many means that we have used over the centuries to handle Scripture, rather than to allow it to handle us, historical criticism has been among the most effective. We want, in our biblical interpretation, to imply that our main problem with Scripture is historical, the gap between our progressive modern world and the primitive, limited world of Jesus. If congregations get the impression that our problem with Scripture is more theological than historical, a matter of obedience to the text, rather than understanding the text, a matter of inspiration, then we are in trouble. We want to let people know that they already have all they need in order to understand the Bible.⁴

2. *Write out your sermons, every word.*

Fill in all the gaps. Make sure that there are no awkward clauses as you move from one abstraction to another in a sermon. Conceive of the sermon as whatever you say, or more to the point, whatever you write down. A sermon is whatever you have on the page. A sermon is the Word of God because I declare it to be so. Sermons are primarily products of fertile, homiletical minds, hard work, the skillful application of good interpretive and rhetorical technique. People in our congregations may be “saved by grace,” but we preachers know that *we* are saved by hard homiletical work. Spend one hour in study for every one-minute you spend in the pulpit, etc.

Again, the essential issue is *control*. Although biblical writers, and later Christian artists, represented the Holy Spirit as a descending dove, we religious professionals know that this Spirit is a *bird with claws*. Give it room in your sermon and the next thing you know, it will take over. Your sermon will become something else than you intended; the congregation will experience uncontrolled interpretive slippage, seep-

age. All sorts of unfortunate, unintended consequences can happen. In preaching, as in any other area of pastoral work, unintended consequences are always to be avoided.

3. Use a great deal of sermon time explaining, defining, and explicating.

How often have I stood up and read some difficult biblical text, feeling the congregation go tense and uneasy even as I am reading it, only to need to reassure them, "Give me twenty minutes and I will explain this to you. I will reassure you that Jesus could not possibly have meant what you first heard him say." Nothing so intimidates and frustrates the Holy Spirit as explanation. Our role as preachers is to fill in the gaps, to defuse the threatening mystery, and to make certain that everyone understands everything. Explanation rather than evocation is our task. Enlightenment rather than enjoyment. Understanding more than wonder. This is why we bolt down the pews in our churches, write rules, print worship bulletins, publish the *Book of Order*, all in an attempt to keep everything as rational as possible. Although the Holy Spirit is certainly more than emotion, the Holy Spirit is known to exploit the emotional. Therefore, keep it all rational.

4. Try to limit your preaching to upwardly mobile, predominately white, economically prosperous congregations.

While this is difficult for those of you who are in the early stages of your ministry, and therefore must do your time among the less affluent, if you really work at your preaching, one day you will be like me and be able to preach to a predominately white congregation with high social status. They believe that they are where they are because they have earned their position. They are not the sort of people who grub around expecting gifts. These are the kinds of congregations who rarely ask for the Holy Spirit and therefore usually don't get much. They expect to get out of worship only what they bring to it. They do not enjoy thinking of something that they did not think of exclusively by themselves. In short, they are a joy to preach to. They come to church mostly for confirmation of what they have always thought, not for revelation. They do not enjoy being out of control. They are the sort of people for whom the present age and the status quo have been incredibly good. Therefore, they have no desire to travel on Sunday morning to anywhere else. The present is quite comfortable for them.

5. If you must get "spiritual" (for that sort of thing is all the rage these days, particularly among the young) just keep it as "the spirit" rather than "the Holy Spirit."

Better still, just "spirit." That way they can think "the human spirit" or "the indomitable spirit of capitalism" or even "school spirit." "Spirit" is something they feel at football games, something generally good, vaguely uplifting, something for high school cheerleaders. Though it may surprise you to hear me say this, the current wave of "spirituality" in America is of immense help in this regard. It has no discernable content, is completely subjective and ethically undemanding. It's the status quo with a warm glow. It is something without words, without location or specificity. Spiritual is what we are when we sit quietly and think uplifting thoughts. Of course, no one has any idea exactly what an experience of "spirituality" really is, other than a nice experience. Vagueness is a great ally in our never ending human attempt to nod toward God, then go ahead, and do what we darn well please.

6. *Serve grape juice rather than wine at the Lord's Supper.*

To be sure, this is more a liturgical than a homiletical matter, however there is an admittedly troublesome linkage between worship and preaching. There is some sort of primitive connection between “spirits” and the Holy Spirit. True, one brand comes via baptism and the laying-on-of-hands while the other comes by way of Lynchburg and Mr. Jack Daniels, yet both have as their chief object to get people high. People do so love to be taken somewhere they are not. Things got utterly out of hand at the nuptials at Cana (John 2). If moves toward abstinence are resisted, reiterate that Christianity is not some primitive mystical cult. It is a set of beliefs, interesting ideas, first principles, social service, moral purity, religious endeavor, and so forth.

Reassure them that Christianity is something you think, not a way you sometimes feel. Theology ought never to degenerate into pneumatology. Such rationalism is relatively easy to inculcate in Methodist, Presbyterian, or even Baptist congregations who are well known for driving out charismatics as soon as they raise their little spirit-filled hands in prayer.⁵ Catholics and Episcopalians, being notoriously soft on charismatics, are a problem. It is in the wine.

Well, enough good advice for now. I leave you to your own devices which, from a thoroughly modern perspective, is the very best place to be left. Best wishes to you in your non-pentecostal, non-charismatic, non-pneumatological preaching.

Notes

¹ I have always resented the “Veni, Creator Spiritus” historically sung at ordinations. Such invocation of the Holy Spirit, combined with the laying-on-of hands, implies that something more is needed among us clergy than a seminary degree and a good score on the MMPI.

² It is no wonder that women first assumed clerical leadership within the Pentecostal churches of North America. The rationale for this is the old “the Spirit blows where it will” (John 3:8) argument. Jettisoning centuries of ecclesial tradition, breaking with the historic practices of the church, these Spirit-dominated churches introduced this radical ecclesiastical innovation. As I have said, this is the sort of thing one can expect from churches with liturgies that are so inadequate that they give license to the incursions of the Holy Spirit.

³ What on earth is one to make of the extravagant claims by William C. Turner, in the otherwise helpful *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Lischer et al., eds., Westminster/John Knox, 1995), that “Preaching is a charismatic act that relies utterly on the grace given by the Spirit to speak for God and bring the hearer into the presence of God. Preaching and all acts pertaining to the ministerial office flow from the work of the Spirit” (p. 227). What is one to make of such claims? Turner sounds almost Pentecostal.

⁴ Here I must commend the Jesus Seminar for managing to publish a score of books of Jesus with no mention of the Holy Spirit, thereby reinforcing the attitude that Jesus, at least that miniscule portion of Jesus that actually occurred, is historical, whereas the Holy Spirit is meta-historical, a theological fabrication, optional equipment. Jesus’ frequent prophetic references to the Spirit (Luke 4, etc.) are obviously not historical (i.e. they do not fit into our definitions of history). We want to keep Jesus as closely linked to the first century as possible, whereas Jesus coupled with the Holy Spirit has a way of intruding into the twenty-first century.

⁵ Of course, I am totally at odds with the opinions espoused by James Forbes in his book, *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989). Forbes makes repeatedly the obviously irrational assertion that there is no Christian preaching without the work of the Holy Spirit. He believes that one is not a preacher unless one has been “anointed.” With ideas like these, Forbes is destined to serve only small congregations within the Southeast for the rest of his ministry.