

The Art and Craft of Preaching

Working Theory

This booklet is a primer on the basic theory of preaching. It is intended especially for beginning preachers and will be of some use until you reach the early stage of maturity and skill in preaching.

It contains no advice. You give advice to someone who has principles and cannot see a clear answer to their situation from those principles. Beginning preachers do not yet have clear principles about what they are doing. Advice is of no value to them. If you give advice to a new preacher, you will never be wrong; and you will never help them.

Beginning preachers need a working theory which is expressed clearly and firmly. This gives them traction on the task of actually preaching, the only way to develop as a preacher. This book of preaching theory is therefore assertive but ultimately disposable.

When you begin to preach, you are not capable of assembling your own theory of preaching. You will adopt a theory from the traditions around you. Then you grow beyond the traditions of preaching with which you began. This is not necessarily a betrayal or mistake. This growing-beyond often results from the Spirit working to help you understand scripture and yourself.

This is what traditions are for: to teach you to run, and in love push you forward to run faster than the tradition could. Without tradition, the Spirit's work would be forgotten from each generation to the next. But it is a memory of the Spirit's work rather than memory replacing the Spirit.

Everything which follows is said confidently, even though it is only loosely true. Beginning preachers are best served by taking this book's theory (or some other approach) as unimpeachably true for their first twenty or thirty sermons. After that, this book will only be of use as a spark for your own reflections.

Consider this book's theory of preaching a dummy to practice striking, or a practice space where you learn to move a ball around. It is necessary for the beginner. After that its value depends on what you bring to the dummy or the practice space.

If you have preached fewer than twenty sermons: no matter your other public speaking experience or theological knowledge, you are a beginning preacher.

Need for Theory

The study of preaching (sometimes called homiletics) is about an act: a particular kind of speaking. Therefore preaching is a practical study. You are learning how to do a certain thing. This requires you to learn new information but that is incidental. Your study succeeds not when you know more about preaching, but when you are able to preach better sermons. Homiletics is more like apprenticing as a cabinet-maker than learning the history of furniture.

Like many human acts, the only way to improve is practice and reflection. The study of preaching is primarily concrete and specific: what am I doing in this sermon? What could be improved from my last sermon? What can I learn from this sermon I am hearing?

These are not theoretical questions. It is fair to ask whether you need to study a theory of a practical art such as preaching. Why not simply begin and improve through practice? This is especially a fair question given how books on preaching multiply theories and models.

Preaching is mostly practical. However, the small amount of theory involved is essential. It is the yeast which works through the whole batch of dough. It is necessary to give a beginning preacher some rough working theory for the following reasons.

Firstly, you need a working theory of preaching to evaluate preaching in the way which scripture does. Scripture cares a great deal about the content, the manner, the ethical implications, and the social expression of preaching. It is possible not only to preach badly but to not preach Jesus at all; or to preach him in a way which tears down his church.

There are not many essential elements to preaching. Scripture is not fussy about the internal structure or forms of preaching. Consider the difference between Stephen's sermon in Acts 7 and Paul's in Acts 17. Stephen preaches like a boulder unstoppably rolling to its conclusion. There is a long rehearsal of Israel's history and it generates the thunderbolt of his application. Paul gradually constructs an argument for the falsehood of idolatry, drawing upon Greek culture, then simply states that there is a day of judgement based upon Jesus' resurrection. These are both gospel preaching and no Christian is at liberty to take one as a model for the church while rejecting the other.

Therefore, every Christian who tries to distinguish true preaching from false, must learn to separate important elements from indifferent elements. This

requires a working theory of what preaching is – otherwise how could you know what is essential and what is accidental? And a Christian who is beginning to preach needs this theory even more. If you are not clear on the nature and purpose of preaching, you can put time and energy into trivial matters while neglecting the essential parts of a sermon.

Preaching happens through the work of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit is not the property of the preacher; it is also the Spirit of scripture and the Spirit of the church. Humble desire to preach means submission to scripture and to the wisdom of the church. If you want to learn preaching, you must receive the working theory of preaching which your church finds in scripture. Holiness and love for Jesus do not equip you to preach. They guide you to the mentors – to scripture, the memory of the church (tradition), and other Christians – who will equip you. The beginning preacher needs a working theory of preaching as a matter of fidelity to scripture and the church.

Secondly, a little working theory makes it easier to learn how to preach. Preaching is not an assembly of separate skills. It is a united but complex act. You cannot, for example preach introductions until you have them down, and only then move on to explaining a text. The whole thing must be done each time.

And like other complex but united skills – such as riding a horse, driving a car, chairing a meeting – it is helpful to have a sense of the whole skill and how its parts interact. They can only be understood and balanced when united into one concept. It is helpful to supply a beginning preacher with one way to approach the whole concept, as listening to preaching usually only gives an indistinct or confused theory of preaching.

Thirdly, how you begin is often how you continue. A little theory at the beginning of preaching creates the possibility of ongoing theoretical development. If you begin with no awareness of theory, developing your theory of preaching will require discovering that there is such a thing. This is not impossible. No one is caged by their past, not even preachers. But there is no reason to add obstacles to wisdom at the beginning.

Finally, a small dose of theory clears away foggy assumptions. Hearing a great deal of preaching does not translate into understanding what it is. You may not even notice the distinctives of your own tradition's preaching. Because theory organises and abstracts from individual sermons, it forces a broader

understanding. In many cases it forces us to confront how confused our broader understanding truly is.

Definition

Preaching is the art and craft of presenting Jesus as the proper object of faith through uninterrupted plain speech.

Preaching. This is a definition of preaching. It does not describe other forms of Christian speech, including many that may happen at the focal point of a worship service. It concerns the activity which the apostles were doing when they evangelised, or announced the victory of Jesus and his coming judgement. Preaching is not necessarily 'evangelistic' in the sense of moving unbelievers to trust in Jesus. It is evangelistic in the sense of presenting Jesus. Any sermon which could have no effect upon an unbeliever is not strictly preaching at all.

Preaching is the art and craft. It is an action. Art and craft both concern an action, where a human being causes an effect outside themselves. Many parts of preaching will involve the preacher's own thoughts and life. But these internal parts are for the sake of an external action.

And this action is an act of making. When you preach you are constructing something. The purpose of preaching is not construction; but it does reach its goal through construction.

I will expand on the terms 'art' and 'craft' later.

Preaching is the art and craft of presenting Jesus. This is what sets preaching apart from other forms of Christian speech. Preaching announces Jesus; it displays his glory. It is the kind of speech which marks the church because it announces the only name through whom salvation comes. No theological, ethical, or historical teaching can save except insofar as it implies what preaching states. A speech which does not present Jesus is not preaching.

Preaching is the art and craft of presenting Jesus as the proper object of faith. Preaching presents Jesus so that people will be united to him by faith. All people are called to trust Jesus because he is the true image of God, the revelation and path to all which is good and right for human beings. Preaching

Jesus in this way implies certain points about humanity, religion, morality, and existence. A preacher is not encouraging the hearer to choose between equally available options. Preaching offers to the hearer everything which they truly desire and were created to receive. Where Jesus is presented as a logical choice, or as the best of good choices, he is not fully understood.

Preaching is the art and craft of presenting Jesus as the proper object of faith through uninterrupted speech. Preaching is a monologue. When the preacher ends or is interrupted, something else is occurring. This is not necessarily wrong. There are other forms of Christian speech. Neither Jesus nor the apostles are always preaching: they have conversations, debates, teaching, and strategic withdrawals.

Preaching is the art and craft of presenting Jesus as the proper object of faith through uninterrupted plain speech. When the Spirit announced its presence at Pentecost, everyone heard the apostles speaking in their own language. This is a transcending of Babel and a program for the church's mission. The church does not pull other nationalities into Jewish ethnicity but sends Jewish Christians outwards to reach other nations. This means preaching the gospel in the vernacular, the ordinary language of the hearers.

Ordinary language does not mean simple in structure, or shallow in meaning. Consider what Jesus does in the gospels, drawing upon nothing but the Old Testament, nature, business, and government. Preaching can involve a great deal of artistry and skill. But it does not alter the language and thought of the hearer except as necessary to present Jesus more clearly.

Art and Craft Defined

In this booklet, art and craft refer to different ways of considering any element or component in a sermon. Art considers how a component serves the overall impression of a sermon. Craft considers how a component achieves its own function. These are different modes of analysis rather than different beliefs about a sermon.

Art is more difficult to plan or discuss because it concerns the sermon as a whole and its presentation of Jesus. There are many elements which can be united or disharmonious. Craft is less difficult to understand because it discusses a smaller unit of speech and whether it achieves a more defined purpose.

For example, in planning or reviewing a sermon illustration, art would consider whether the illustration helped develop an aspect of the overall impression. Does it add a jarring emotional note? Or is that note required to counterbalance other parts of the sermon? These questions relate one unit to every other part of the sermon. Craft, however, would consider whether the illustration actually gave a useful image of an idea. Is the illustration longer than it needs to be? Is it introduced in a way which highlights the key idea? And so on.

Art and craft arise from the interplay between the formal and material elements of the sermon: how the raw stuff of speech embodies and conveys Jesus. Art does so without intermediaries, connecting material to present Jesus through a single speech. Craft has intermediate forms, the lesser ideas and purposes of each part within a sermon.

Formal Element

The formal element of preaching – the single idea which unites and directs one speech – is Jesus as the proper object of faith. However, you cannot present all of a person in one speech. This is not possible for any human and certainly not for a human who is also God.

A sermon therefore presents one aspect or view of Jesus. This is an impression upon the hearer which arises out of the sermon as a whole. A sermon can have several unrelated points, but it has one combined impression due to its nature as a single speech. The art and craft of preaching is to ensure that this impression is, (i) a true sense of Jesus, and (ii) clear and united rather than contradictory and confusing.

The simplest and best way to create a clear impression is to plan it in advance. This involves writing out, or at least thinking, the distilled idea of the sermon. Some books on preaching call this the big idea or proposition. The name does not matter. I have said impression to remind you that preaching aims at the whole person. Emotions, moods, drama, tension, desires, detestations – these are also part of an impression. In the case of expository preaching, the impression of the sermon should be drawn from the passage. This means not merely saying what the passage says regarding Jesus but conveying its spirit or tone as well.

Consider the story of Jesus calming the storm in Mark. My imperfect summary of this passage is 'Jesus has divine power over creation.' But this would not be a satisfying impression for a sermon. The passage stresses fear: Jesus asks why the disciples are afraid, and they are terrified before Jesus' authority over nature. And Jesus' power is not a bare fact; he seems to think it should have prevented the disciples from being afraid. Power, faith, and fear are woven together. A good impression or big trajectory for the sermon will give an impression of Jesus' divine power and how it can reshape disciples of who have little faith.

You can see that distilling a passage in this way is no easy thing. It is often more difficult than planning a sequence of theological ideas. And if the impression is wrong, the sermon cannot go well. It is easy to panic and rush into choosing words when you don't have a defined impression to guide you. Even when time to prepare is short, a clear and comprehensive impression will help you more than many unrelated thoughts on the passage.

The formal element of a sermon, its overall unity or underlying structure, includes emotion and passion as well as ideas and facts. A clear and comprehensive sermon impression does not only state that Jesus is A or B. It conveys that impression of Jesus and trains the hearer to see him in that way. It is one thing to describe an apple, and another to make your hearer hungry; and another again to feed them upon Jesus.

Material Elements

The material elements of preaching are the stuff which is shaped by the form (Jesus) to represent that form. The interaction between form and matter leads to art and craft. And the matter in this case is speech: not only words but the way they are said by the preacher. Words are symbols which represent other things. But they come with associations beyond their direct meaning. Words have contexts, connotations, implications, and aural qualities. The preacher must pay attention to all aspects of a spoken word.

In a crude sense, preaching is nothing but the selection and delivery of words. You use words as a bricklayer uses bricks. Know your words. Do not use any word or phrase unless you are certain of its meaning and pronunciation. This applies to theological concepts as well.

Further, preaching aim to create an impression of Jesus in the hearer. Therefore it requires a knowledge not only of words, but of the effect of words upon the hearer. Are some words too complicated, or carrying negative associations, or freighted with some historical problem? This is no longer knowledge but wisdom. And it is a wisdom which comes from insight into the hearers. There is an abstract idea of preaching but no abstract wise preaching, only wise preaching to a specific group of hearers.

Because the material of preaching is speech, there is no such thing as a written sermon. There can be a written plan for a sermon, or a transcript of a sermon, but in neither case is it a sermon. Even an audio-visual recording is not quite the same as the sermon itself. And the rules or 'grammar' of a sermon are the rules of speaking, not the rules of writing. There are no full stops, commas, colons, semicolons, or dashes in a sermon. There are only pauses and emphasis of various kinds which you might plan using written punctuation.

Craft and Technique

Craft considers how one element of a sermon achieves its purpose. Does an introduction introduce the topic, does an illustration clarify, do comforting words truly bring comfort? These are questions of craft.

Craft congeals into technique when the element's effect upon the hearer does not support the sermon's overall impression of Jesus. Technique is rhetorical skill grown insubordinate. This occurs when the relative weights or densities of sermon elements and the overall impression are not correct. The impression can be insubstantial or impossible to declare, or the sermon elements can be too substantial, or effective in the wrong direction.

Craft is the practical study of effect. It must be integrated with purpose. When a sermon element does not have its intended effect, the sermon element is bad. Or clumsy might be a better word. When a sermon element's execution exceeds its purpose, the element is usually not bad. The level of craft actually makes the sermon more dangerous. At that point craft is affecting the hearers beyond calling them to trust Jesus; it is no longer serving a deliberate impression of Jesus but serving the preacher.

This sounds silly – how could part of a sermon be too good? – but it is easy to observe. A sermon on the comfort of divine adoption contains a very striking applicative illustration about living up to your family name. The main impression which lingers is that Christians must live worthy of our adopted name. This is a good thing to say – but the impression is no longer of Jesus as instrument of adoption. The impression is Jesus as measure of family resemblance. If the preacher is reflecting the several-sided meaning of adoption in some passage, this is good. If the preacher meant to be mainly comforting, this is a serious problem.

Technique can also occur when the sermon's overall impression is indistinct and lacks any weight of its own. The sermon's elements cannot serve the impression because there is nothing to serve. This can happen because the preacher failed to choose between (or synthesise) conflicting impressions of Jesus, or because they were not clear in their own mind about their purpose.

The worst kind of technique is when a sermon element is over-emphasised because its effect is so powerful. This can be a stirring illustration of faith or a heart-wrenching story or an appeal to existing affections in the hearer. If a

preacher does anything because it 'gets a response' they have abandoned preaching.

Merely creating some passion or affection, without a sound link to Jesus, is not the Spirit's work. At best it is harmless, at worst it distracts hearers away from the narrow path. There is a warning both preachers and necromancers should heed: Do not raise up what you cannot lay to rest. If a sermon element's effect does not support your overall impression, do not introduce it.

Art and Aesthetic

Art considers the impression of Jesus conveyed by a sermon as a whole. What aspects of Jesus are conveyed here? Do they provoke the affections which they should? Does Jesus appear in the manner this passage declares him? These are questions of art.

Art dissolves into aesthetic when the preacher focuses on creating a strong impression over creating an impression of Jesus. The sermon ceases to convey some definite impression of Jesus; it loses Christological content. Aesthetic may give a powerful impression, but it is not specifically an impression of Jesus. This leads to an unfortunate separation from craft. Since craft is concerned with subordinate parts of the sermon, it is always aimed at some definite effect. When the overall impression is not Jesus, aesthetic will produce a vagueness or cursory kind of craft.

The nature of an aesthetic impression can vary. Indeterminate content is the definition of aesthetic preaching. A preacher who neglects Jesus for the sake of rhetorical elegance, a preacher who aims at creating certain ethical or political convictions, and a preacher who wishes to be respected, are each making the same mistake in terms of a theory of preaching.

The only guard against aesthetic preaching is a devotion to glorifying Jesus and the firm belief that preaching Jesus can achieve this. On the one hand, preachers must lay aside projects and causes, personal goals and tastes. These things may be good but they are not appropriate unless they flow from declaring Jesus.

On the other hand, preachers must rest their confidence in the Spirit rather than their own art and craft. The flesh's view of preaching does not inspire confidence. What can a string of words do against hard hearts and the cruel realities of a fallen age? It can drive a preacher to give up on making Jesus known and settle for a lower goal. Or a preacher can accept any approach or aesthetic which seems to have a real effect. Against this we can trust in the Spirit's work, which is often invisible and always omnipotent.

Growth of a Preacher

A beginning preacher does not know their own strengths or weaknesses. They can grow by adopting their tradition's manner of preaching, preaching as much as they can, and identifying one area to improve after each sermon.

A developing preacher can prepare a sermon and has a vague working theory of preaching. It is too early for them to make substantial departures from their own tradition's way of preaching. They can grow by developing a clear goal for each sermon, and by identifying which types of sermon elements are most effective for them.

A competent preacher can preach and has a working theory of preaching. They are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. At this stage a preacher should be reading and observing the best in other traditions of preaching. They should focus on precisely those sermon elements which do not come naturally to them.

A skilled preacher can leverage their strengths in any situation, or ameliorate their weaknesses. The best way to improve their sermons is to ensure their overall impressions are clear and appropriate. These preachers are the most exposed to technique and aesthetic.

A very skilled preacher adjusts their approach to each situation. They improve best by considering the fundamentals of their approach to preaching. Because this level of skill often brings praise, they must protect their holiness against pride and lesser goals.