

AASS 5 (2002): 73-82

Paper presented during the

AIAS Theological Forum 2002: Hermeneutics: "How Readest Thou?"

August 14-17, 2002

HERMENEUTICS AND PREACHING

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The Bible teaches that preaching is the first and foremost task of the gospel worker.¹ The call for God's work is primarily for preaching the gospel to the people. Accordingly, it is impossible to be a pastor without being a preacher. In this sense, Carlyle B. Haynes is right in his understanding of preaching as the chief occupation of the pastor. He states,

All that the minister has to do among men centers in preaching. That is his chief business. It is for this that he was called, and chosen, and trained, and equipped. And in his mind it must be always the most weighty and important of all human transactions and efforts. His lifelong endeavor is to be a better, a more effective, preacher.²

The role of the pastor as preacher is to proclaim the word of God, for "preaching is the proclamation of the word of God to men by men under assignment from God. It is the ordained means for the transmission of the word of God to the world."³ But the preacher must remember that "preaching is not a

¹The most prominent examples are the Great Commission of Christ, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15); and Paul's charge to Timothy, "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2). All quoted Bible texts are from the NKJV.

²Carlyle B. Haynes, *The Divine Art of Preaching* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1939), 15.

³Carl G. Kromminga, "Preach, Preaching," *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 414. The same concept is found in Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, trans. Richard Strachan (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), 371: "Preaching is the proclamation of God's word by those whom the church has commissioned in Christ's name."

simple repetition” of Bible messages, but is to actualize these messages “into the present.”⁴ It means that the task of the preacher is not only “to speak as a personal witness to God’s revelation” but also to interpret and apply it “to the needs of the people.”⁵ Since interpretation is one of the most important elements in preaching, a preacher must be a good interpreter as well as a good speaker.

In every sermon the biblical text should be the basis of the sermon.⁶ The preacher’s role as biblical interpreter is to interpret the text for his or her congregation.

Understanding the text is in many ways the most crucial aspect of preparing the sermon, since what the preacher asks here is precisely the question a member of his congregation will ask: ‘How may I understand this text so that I hear God speaking through it?’ For this reason, among others, the current hermeneutical enterprise is of great importance to the preacher. Understanding is the key to the hermeneutical interest. . . . Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation—a study fundamental to Christian preaching because preaching takes its rise from a given text which is to be interpreted.⁷

Two factors come to the fore: the text is to be interpreted in its original setting; then, it is to be interpreted in the context of the listeners.

Understanding the Original Meaning

Understanding the original meaning of the text is the first step in the task of biblical preaching. As to this matter, Randolph declares,

Once the text has been chosen, the interpreter must attempt to enter into it, to understand it, we may say, on its own terms. The preacher’s willingness to

⁴K. Runia, “Preaching, Theology of,” *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 528. Runia states with greater clarity: “If preaching is to be true and relevant, the message of Scripture must be addressed to people in their concrete historical situation. The biblical message may not be adapted to the situation of today, but it must be accommodated to the situation.” *Ibid.*

⁵J. S. Baird, “Preach, Preaching,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 868. This concept of preaching is well elaborated in the following statement: “Christian preaching is still rooted in the biblical revelation, where it has a three-fold responsibility. It has first to elucidate for the hearers the meaning of the biblical text for those who first wrote it and first heard or read it: the work of exegesis; it has to translate that meaning into the terms and understanding of twentieth-century culture: the work of interpretation; it has to relate the meaning of the text to the contemporary situations, personal and corporate, with which the hearers are confronted: the task of application.” John Stacey, “Preaching,” *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Dowden (London: SMC, 1983), 459.

⁶David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 34.

⁷*Ibid.*, 36-37.

suspend his own interest at this point is not based on the assumption that he can step outside the text's claim on his life into some neutral zone. It is based precisely on the need to hear the text clearly so that his decision may be authentic. The moment of cold and sober analysis takes place within the context of one's personal commitment and for the sake of that commitment.⁸

The goal of entering into the text is to understand its objective meaning,⁹ that is, to grasp "the main line of meaning of the text in relationship to the contours of the Bible itself."¹⁰ This study, though it "may have its dry moments,"¹¹ is one of the most important parts of sermon preparation, for the preacher cannot deliver the right message from the Bible to the audience unless he or she has a clear understanding of "the world of the text."¹²

How can the preacher know this world, that is, the original context and intention of the text? First of all, there should be a careful study of the words of the text. It is important for the preacher to understand the original meaning of individual words of the text because "there is no sense in trying to get at the meaning of a passage without having a handle on unfamiliar words."¹³

Secondly, the text is to be examined in its context in the Bible. Although understanding the original meaning of the words is of great importance in biblical interpretation, it is insufficient for a comprehensive picture of the text. Only when the text is understood in its literary context is its proper meaning comprehended. On this matter, James Cox rightly observes,

⁸Ibid., 38-39.

⁹Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *The Biblical Interpreter: An Agrarian Bible in an Industrial Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 105-6.

¹⁰Randolph, 41.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Walter Vogels, *Reading and Preaching the Bible: A New Semiotic Approach* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1986), 19. James W. Cox, *Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 66, puts strong emphasis on this matter: "Know what the Bible meant. . . . The task of the pulpit can be carried out only if we know what the text meant. When this is the case, when the church and its teaching and preaching ministry are exposed to the Bible in its original intention and intensity, then they will be exposed in every way to its 'ever new challenge.' It will not do to read our own way of thinking back into the text. Not until we have let the text speak in its own language are we prepared to translate it into our contemporary tongue."

¹³Lee J. Gugliotto, *Handbook for Bible Study: A Guide to Understanding, Teaching, and Preaching the Word of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1995), 49. Concerning the necessity of studying every single word in the text, Gugliotto says, "Although certain words play a key role in the passage, exegesis requires a basic understanding of every word involved—working from root meanings, the initial thrust carried to the sentence—to contextual meanings, the final sense picked up from the sentence and the rest of the Bible context." For a detailed explanation on how to do word studies, see *ibid.*, 49-71.

Interpretation . . . does not proceed so much on atomistic meanings found in individual words and metaphors as on related meanings in a syntactical context. The problem is usually not what this or that word or phrase means, but what the sentence or story as a whole means. Often the meaning of the individual word derives as much, perhaps more, from the immediate context as from the original root from which it sprang or from other contexts in which the word has been used.¹⁴

In the study of the context, not only the immediate context but also the section context,¹⁵ the book context,¹⁶ and the canonical context¹⁷ are to be examined.

Finally, the text and its context are to be understood in their original cultural setting. Every biblical text chosen for preaching was originally given to ancient people in their cultural contexts. It is, therefore, very difficult for the preacher to understand the real meaning of the text unless he or she is acquainted with the culture of that time.¹⁸ Norval F. Pease's comment on this question is worthy of attention:

¹⁴Cox, 67. Gugliotto, 25, concurs: "In your study of God's Word, avoid incomplete conclusions. Don't isolate a passage from what comes before or after it in the text. Instead, get the whole picture. To do this you will need to acquaint yourself with the context, the entire body of text surrounding a passage, which sheds light on its meaning."

¹⁵The preacher needs to focus attention on the natural breaks in the texts that divide the book into sections. The text he or she has chosen for preaching has to be understood in relation to the main idea of the section. For a detailed explanation, see Gugliotto, 29-30.

¹⁶It is hard for the preacher to understand the true meaning of the text unless he or she has a comprehensive understanding of "the overall plan and purpose of the book" from which the text has been selected. The text is to be interpreted in harmony with the general theme of the book. Gugliotto, 28-29.

¹⁷Whenever the preacher interprets a certain passage of the Bible, he or she must keep in mind the theme and purpose of the Bible, that is, the salvation of fallen human beings. In the interpretation of the passage for preaching, the relationship between the text and the great theme of salvation has to be consistently shown. For further details, see Gugliotto, 26-28.

¹⁸On the necessity of the study of ancient cultures, Madeleine S.O Miller and J. Lane Miller state, "The Bible was not written to introduce us to an ancient people with seemingly strange ways. It was written to introduce us to the ways of God Himself. But we live so far away from the people in the Bible, both in distance and in time, that we are puzzled and confused by certain elements that were neither puzzling nor confusing to the writers themselves or to their earliest readers." Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, paperback ed. rev. Boyce M. Bennett Jr., and David H. Scott (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 1. Randolph, 106, is very clear: "It is not enough to know that the Gospel of Matthew was written just after the fall of Jerusalem from somewhere in Syria-Palestine. Nor is it enough to know that it may have been written by a Jewish Christian for Jewish Christians. We also need to know if it was written by and for the upper classes. We need to know the sociological context of the characters, the events, the language, and even the form of Matthew's stories. Without this kind of information our ability to understand what the text once meant to say is limited significantly."

Horrible blunders have been made by preachers who neglected to acquaint themselves with the contextual and historical background . . . of the Bible. . . As preachers, we owe it to our listeners and to God to be reverently meticulous in our interpretation of God's Word.¹⁹

For information on the cultures of the biblical times, not only the Bible itself but also the extrabiblical literature and archaeological findings are to be consulted. It is also compulsory to refer to the historical, anthropological, geographical, socio-religious, economical, and political environments of those days.²⁰

Understanding the Contemporary Meaning

Biblical interpretation is not "merely saying what the text once meant" but "includes a concern for the conditions under which the text may say something to us today."²¹ This concept is based on our understanding of the function of the Bible.

Christians contend that their Scriptures are not merely records of past experiences with God but also resources providing insight into human thought, feelings and behavior, and a view of the future. Understanding correctly the message of the Scriptures leads to an understanding of what God is doing in the world and how one can be a Christian in the world.²²

Thus, in hermeneutics "what it means" is no less important than "what it meant." This is especially true for preaching, for what is significant is not "the exposition of the text but its execution,"²³ since "the task of preaching relates the ancient text to the people to whom the preached word is now spoken again as a living word."²⁴

¹⁹Norval F. Pease, "Preaching and Biblical Interpretation," in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Gordon M. Hyde (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Committee, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974), 259.

²⁰For a detailed expose, see Gugliotto, 72-119.

²¹Rohrbaugh, 106.

²²Raymond Bailey, "Hermeneutics: A Necessary Art," in *Hermeneutics for Preaching: Approaches to Contemporary Interpretations of Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 8.

²³Cox, 68.

²⁴David Dockery, "Preaching and Hermeneutics," in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Dudit (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 142. Randolph, 44, observes, "Seeing the text in relation to our lives and the lives of our contemporaries is part of the process of understanding the text. This contemporary reference contributes to our primary grasp of the text at the level of discovering the concern of the sermon; it is not something to be added to an already complete understanding of the text. We may achieve some of our most acute insights into the text when we see it in juxtaposition to our life and times."

This work of contemporizing the meaning “in a new and different world-context”²⁵ is well exemplified in the sermons of Christ. The most outstanding example is His Sermon on the Mount, in which He “gave the true interpretation to the Old Testament Scriptures, expounding the truth that had been perverted by the rulers, the scribes, and the Pharisees.”²⁶ On several occasions Christ reinterpreted the OT texts, presenting new meanings relevant to His congregation or listeners.²⁷ Likewise, the modern preacher must make his or her interpretation meaningful to the listeners. The text must be relevant to them.

A preacher’s purpose for interpreting the Bible is different from that of a scholar’s, for the preacher “interprets the Bible in order to persuade people to become Christians and to nurture those who are already Christians.”²⁸ In short, no congregation, no preaching.²⁹ In other words, the preacher should interpret the text so that it becomes meaningful in the context of his or her listeners.³⁰ If he or she fails to do this, the sermon will be nothing but “sounding brass or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1) to them.

Regarding the preacher’s work of interpreting the Bible in the context of his or her listeners, the following two points are to be emphasized. First, the preacher must know the situation of the listeners precisely and bring out the suitable meaning of the text for them. Achtemeier’s comment is penetrating:

The preacher should not guess at the condition of the people, any more than he or she should guess at the meaning of the text. Visiting in members’ homes and in their hospital rooms, listening to their conversations, paying attention to their comments during committee meetings, counseling, going to church suppers, taking

²⁵Vogels, 20.

²⁶Ellen G. White, “The Teacher of Righteousness,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 6 August 1895, 497.

²⁷Matt 13:14-15 and 15:8-9 are typical examples. On these occasions Jesus reinterpreted Isa 6:9-10 and 29:13.

²⁸Pease, 257.

²⁹This concept is strongly emphasized in Randolph’s definition of sermon: “A true sermon is an address to a particular people at a particular time in a particular place; it is not a general word to the universe.” Randolph, 44-45.

³⁰Elizabeth Achtemeier stresses the importance of the preacher’s task to comprehend the situation of his or her congregation, as follows: “The preacher must know not only the message of the text . . . but also the situation into which the text is spoken. We not only exegete the biblical passage; we also must exegete daily the condition of our congregation. Discerning that difference in the condition of our people is a full-time pastoral job. In other words, the preacher not only listens to a text for himself or herself. He or she also engages in . . . priestly listening—that is, listening to the Word on behalf of the congregation, listening to its specific message for that specific community, at that particular time and place.” Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching: Finding the Words* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 54-55.

part in every form of congregational activity—these are priceless exegetical opportunities, through which the alert preacher learns to know his or her people.³¹

Secondly, whenever the preacher interprets the Bible, he or she must be mindful of the situation of the individual listeners. This is crucial, because those who listen to the preacher are not the congregation as a whole but individual members. Moreover, the preacher needs to understand that “no two people sitting in a congregation share precisely the same social perception of reality, nor do they bring to the hearing of the text the same preunderstanding with which to hear it.”³² Randolph’s observation is suggestive:

Before he was to preach, a certain preacher would go into the empty sanctuary and sit in the pew of first this person and then that. As he sat in each person’s place, he would try to picture the meaning of his text to them. What has this text to say to this man who is old and hard of hearing? To this young girl who is trying to decide whether to go to college or to work at home? To this young man who has felt a call to the ministry but is seriously involved with a girl of another faith? To this man who is a successful executive but who yearns for new life? Such questions as these, questions asked from within the existential situation, can throw light on corners of scripture which remain hidden from other analytical methods.³³

The key for effective biblical interpretation in preaching is to know “the contemporary condition of God’s gathered people.”³⁴ The preacher must remember that his or her task as interpreter is not finished until he or she knows the condition and “hears the text . . . speak to that condition.”³⁵ It seems proper to conclude this section with Cox’s comment on preaching: “Preaching must be as old as the truth it proclaims and as modern as the day it is done. The message emerges from eternity, yet it is as fresh in its application as this morning’s newspaper.”³⁶

The Preacher’s Role in Biblical Interpretation

In preaching, there are three indispensable elements: the text, the listeners, and the preacher.³⁷ In the first section we focused on the text, and in the second section we focused on the listeners. Finally, this section deals with the preacher, giving special attention to his or her role in biblical hermeneutics.

³¹Ibid., 55-56.

³²Rohrbaugh, 108.

³³Randolph, 45-46.

³⁴Achtemeier, 55.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Cox, 29.

³⁷Vogels, 17.

The text and the listeners are in front of the preacher. He or she always stands between these two. The preacher's role as interpreter, in a word, is to connect these two elements. This work of connection can be designated in three different terms: bridging, mediation, and translation.

First of all, the preacher's role as interpreter is to bridge the gap between the text and the listeners. The necessity of the role is based on the fact that there is a great distance between the text and the listeners in time and in culture.

The world of the Bible was different from our world. The language sounds strange (even when translated). The lives of the people were unlike ours. Time, people, and events moved more slowly. People lived in a world without modern conveniences; there were no telephones, automobiles, or airplanes.³⁸

The primary function of a bridge is to give two separated communities opportunities to have intercourse with each other. The bridge allows people to exchange their goods, their ideas, and even their ways of life. In the same manner, the preacher, as a bridge, should provide the opportunities for communication and intercourse to the two communities which are entirely separated from each other: the community of the text and the community of the listeners. By way of this bridge the listeners can travel in the world of the text and share their ideas, lives, and cultures with the people of those days. In this way the ultimate purpose of hermeneutics is achieved.³⁹

Secondly, the preacher's role as interpreter is to mediate between the text and the listeners. The role of a mediator is not only to deliver a message from one party to the other but also "to bring reconciliation between two parties."⁴⁰ Christ was the "Mediator" (Heb 8:6) between God and humanity. His role as the Mediator was not merely to proclaim God's message to people but to reconcile God and humankind. Likewise, the preacher, as mediator, is to be engaged in the work of reconciliation between the text and the listeners. This role of the preacher is well expressed in the following statement,

The preacher's role is to act as mediator. He has to do more than simply present the text to his listeners, after all they can read the Bible themselves. Nor is he reading the text solely for his own personal enrichment—this would be to meditate upon the Bible. He is supposed to give a homily. He has to evoke the world of the

³⁸Bailey, 9. See also Vogels, 18.

³⁹The ultimate goal of hermeneutics in preaching is to help the listeners experience the Bible world and "discover meaning in the past that will affect, perhaps effect, existence in the present." Bailey, 9.

⁴⁰H. W. Hoehner, "Mediation, Mediator," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 701.

text in such a way that the listener is invited to enlarge the horizon of his own world.⁴¹

The most important and indispensable qualification of a mediator is that he or she must belong to both parties or worlds. This is why Christ, who is God, became a man. In like manner, the preacher as mediator “has to belong to the two worlds at the same time: the world of the text and the world of the listener.”⁴² In other words, the preacher should live in both worlds at the same time and experience and witness both.

Finally, the preacher’s role as interpreter is to translate the world of the text into the world of the listeners. A preacher’s job as translator is “much more than translating a Hebrew or a Greek word into a more or less corresponding word in English”⁴³ or in any other modern language. If that was all that was required in preaching, then preaching would be unnecessary, for even individual believers can understand the meaning of the biblical words with the help of lexicons and dictionaries. In relation to this question, Ernest Best states,

The ultimate translation that we make . . . as preachers . . . is not from one set of words in Scripture into another set of words in a sermon or a discussion group, but from one life into another life. Scripture is the crystallization of Christ within certain situations and cultures. Our sermons or our understandings are new crystallizations.⁴⁴

The work of translation in preaching must be from one life to another life and from one culture to another culture. Thus, the ultimate role of the preacher as translator is to translate, not the words of the text into a certain modern language, but the world of the text into the world of the listeners.

Summary

Preaching is the proclamation of the word of God. This proclamation does not mean the mere repetition of the messages of the Word. It must include the interpretation of the Word. For this reason, the preacher is required to be a good interpreter as well as a good speaker.

⁴¹Vogels, 18.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ernest Best, *From Text to Sermon: Responsible Use of the New Testament in Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 112-13. See also Stephen I. Wright, “An Experiment in Biblical Criticism: Aesthetic Encounter in Reading and Preaching Scripture,” in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 257-58.

As biblical interpreter, the preacher has to interpret the given text for preaching; first, in its original context, then in the context of the listeners. Understanding the original meaning of the text is the beginning stage of biblical interpretation. This is important because it is impossible for the preacher to interpret the text in the context of the listeners without a clear and correct understanding of its original meaning. For the proper understanding of "what the text meant," first of all, every word of the text must be carefully studied; then, the text is to be examined in its context in the Bible; and finally, it should be understood in its cultural setting.

Understanding the original meaning is not the end of the preacher's work as interpreter. He or she must reinterpret the text in the modern context, for preaching is not for people of ancient times but for the congregation in the twenty-first century. This work of contemporizing the meaning of the text is exemplified in the sermons of Christ.

In relation to the work of reinterpretation of the text in the context of the listeners, there are two important factors the preacher must keep in mind. One is that the preacher has to know the situation of the listeners precisely. He or she must not guess the situation but experience and witness it firsthand. The other is that those who listen to the preacher are not the congregation as a whole but individual listeners. Therefore, the preacher must understand the situation of each listener and make his or her interpretation meaningful to each.

The preacher's role as biblical interpreter, in general, is to link his or her listeners to the text and vice versa. This role of the preacher requires him or her to be a bridge, a mediator, and a translator. As a bridge, the preacher links the world of the text to the world of the listeners. Via this bridge the listeners travel into the world of the text, sharing the ideas, lives, and cultures of the people in that world. As a mediator, the preacher reconciles the text and the listeners. This role requires the preacher to belong to both worlds. It means that he or she must experience and witness both the situation of the text and that of the listeners. As a translator, the preacher translates not only the words of the text but also the life and culture of the times of the text into the contemporary setting. What is ultimately to be translated by the preacher is not the words of the text into a certain modern language but the world of the text into the world of the listeners.