

PERSUASIVE IMPACT IN PREACHING

LESLIE N. POLLARD

Introduction

The fact that there is probably not one preacher alive who would pass up an opportunity to increase the impact of his/her preaching to local congregations raises important questions. As preachers, exactly how can we increase the persuasive power of our preaching? How can our preaching carry more impact, more punch, and more potency? This presentation discusses the issue of persuasiveness in preaching. I invite you to consider the following questions: (1) What is persuasive preaching? (2) What is a sermon? (3) How can we increase the persuasive impact of our preaching?

These three questions may ring with such familiarity that we may assume that we already know the answers. But do not draw conclusions too quickly because the answers one submits to these questions will guide one's ministry of preaching. These three questions are critical for all conscientious preachers, because if as preachers, we fail to adequately implement biblical answers to these questions, then the results will disable our preaching ministry.

What Is Persuasive Preaching?

I maintain throughout this presentation that preaching, by its essential nature, is *persuasive communication*. It does not matter whether that preaching is pastoral or evangelistic in its thrust. Persuasive communication is communication that aims to convince and move the hearer to act upon God's revelation in Scripture and history. However, preaching as persuasive communication is not propaganda because of its inherent concern for truth (cf. John 16:13; 8:32; 17:17). In Spirit-filled preaching, end and means are compatible.

But what is persuasive preaching? Persuasive preaching is not academic lecturing, though it embraces and utilizes academic research. The preacher who burdens his audience with reams of tedious citations may praise him/herself for being thorough, but it will probably frustrate the hearer. Persuasive preaching is not entertaining speaking, though our preaching must be interesting and attractive. Persuasive preaching is not simply informational sharing on some subject of the Bible, though the well-researched sermon always includes some pertinent information in its content. To put it succinctly, *persuasive preaching is preaching that aims to break down resistance to, or indifference toward, the kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ, while at the same time, respecting the responsibility of the hearer to make an intelligent and lasting decision.*

In the NT this mode of preaching is evident in the many uses of the verb *peitho*, "to persuade" or "to convince." Observe how this verb reveals the intent of preaching and teaching in Paul's ministry, especially in the book of Acts: Paul and Barnabas "urged them to continue in the grace of God" (13:43); Paul reasoned "trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (18:4); Paul argued "persuasively about the

kingdom of God" (19:8); Agrippa asked Paul, "Do you think in such a short time you can persuade me?" (26:28); Paul declared the gospel "trying to convince them about Jesus" (28:23); and Paul said, "Since we know what it is to fear God, we persuade men" (2 Cor 5:11).¹

New Testament preaching urges men and women to "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). Its goal is to lead the listener to finally say "yes" to God. Persuasive preaching is earnest and intelligent. As such, it is unswerving in its purpose, though its methods may vary in time and place (cf. 1 Cor 9:19-23). Persuasive preaching includes subjective elements in its presentation, while at the same time it "works" objective facts. In its holism, it is both rational and fiery, marrying the analysis of Athens with the fervor of Jerusalem. Indeed, persuasive preaching is the only type of preaching that the NT knows.

Persuasive preaching does more than inform the listener; it arrests the hearer and convicts him/her. Academicians (who make a great contribution to the ministry of preaching by their research and writing) rarely carry this burden as does the pastor who steps into the pulpit from week to week. In his preaching the pastor is consistently attempting to convince his/her parishioners that God's way is still the best way, in spite of appearances to the contrary. Examine at length what has been written by several authorities who have devoted their lives to the study of an active preaching ministry:

Preaching is that unique procedure by which God, through His chosen messenger, reaches down into the human family and brings persons face to face with Himself.²

Preaching is not primarily arguing about something, commenting about something, philosophizing about something, or weaving speech into a beautiful tapestry of sound. Preaching is bearing witness, telling something that we know to people who want to know or who ought to know, or both.³

Preaching is the divinely ordained power of personal testimony; it is Christ speaking through a called, chosen, cleansed, and commissioned messenger.⁴

Preaching is "the art of moving men from a lower to a higher life."⁵

Preaching is the spoken communication of truth by man to men. . . .
Preaching is the bringing of truth through personality.⁶

¹Unfortunately, the translators of the *New International Version* have rendered the phrase "we try to persuade men." But the Greek text uses the present active indicative (not the infinitive of purpose) to say clearly that "we are persuading men" or "we do persuade men."

²Charles W. Koller, *Expository Preaching Without Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 13.

³H. M. S. Richards, *Feed My Sheep* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 19.

⁴Carlyle B. Haynes, *The Divine Art of Preaching* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1939), 19.

⁵Henry Ward Beecher, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1900), 29.

⁶Phillip Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1907), 5.

Preaching is the communication of divine truth with a view to persuasion.⁷

Preaching is truth through personality to constrain conscience at once.⁸

Preaching is divine truth voiced by a chosen personality to meet human need.⁹

God is not so much the object as the true source of Christian preaching. Preaching is thus speech by God rather than speech about God.¹⁰

Preaching is the communication of biblical truth by man to men with the explicit purpose of eliciting behavioral change.¹¹

Preaching is the proclamation of the gospel—telling the good news of what God has done, is doing, and will do. It is not talking about God, but it is the means, in each generation by which God speaks to the people. Preaching is not a person revealing God and truths about him. It is God disclosing himself and speaking of himself through a chosen witness.¹²

Preaching is a means of grace. It constitutes God's primary method of saving souls, and it is not the preacher who teaches by means of preaching, but Jesus Christ Himself.¹³

Our preaching, commissioned by the resurrection, is a continuation of the preaching of Jesus Christ. It is "a spiritual discipline in which we offer our best words to Christ."¹⁴

Preaching is "making present and appropriate to the hearers the revelation of God."¹⁵

Having garnered all of this information, this is how I define preaching:

Preaching is the persuasive proclamation of the Gospel message. It is not an academic lecture, though it respects learning. It is not a political lecture, though it impinges upon politics. It is not a personal reminiscence, though it embraces the speaker's history. It is not the dispensing of 'good advice', though it is aware of the great issues of our 'being'. Preaching is God's powerful declaration through us of what Christ accomplished at Calvary. It is God's message and not ours. It announces what God did in Jesus Christ, what God does through Jesus Christ, and what God will do in those who love Jesus Christ.

⁷T. H. Pattison, *The Making of the Sermon* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publ. Soc., 1898), 3.

⁸H. S. Coffin, *What to Preach* (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), 157.

⁹A. W. Blackwood, *The Fine Art of Preaching* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 3.

¹⁰J. J. Von Allmen, *Preaching and Congregations* (London: Lutterworth, 1962), 7.

¹¹J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 13.

¹²Richard Carl Hoefler, *Creative Preaching and Oral Writing* (Lima, OH: C. S. S., 1984), 5.

¹³C. Raymond Holmes, *The Last Word: An Eschatological Theology of Preaching* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 19.

¹⁴David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 449, 452.

¹⁵Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 51.

Interestingly, two types of preaching are present in the NT, didactic and kerygmatic. Around the middle of the last century, C. H. Dodd imposed a stiff division between the two by concluding that the former was directed to the saved while the latter was directed to the unbelieving.¹⁶ However, careful examination of Dodd's dichotomy reveals that his separation of kerygma and didache is both artificial and unnecessary.¹⁷ Didactic and kerygmatic preaching actually complement each other. *Kerygma* is the foundational proclamation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and as such, it forms the foundation upon which *didache* rests. *Didache* is the explanation in detail of that applied truth which is the outgrowth of *kerygma*. As preachers, we do not have to choose one at the expense of the other. Donald Demaray shares a helpful insight about these two aspects of our preaching ministry:

Preaching that attends to both—didactic-kerygmatic preaching—brings healing and wholeness. Preaching overweighted on the kerygmatic side, emphasizing conversion and minimizing nurture, retards mental and spiritual maturity in Christian discipleship. Preaching overweighted on the didactic side may focus on the theological or on the social implications of the gospel. In either extreme, the result is deformed Christians lacking Christ-centered faith and joy. The New Testament preacher keeps the two in balance.¹⁸

The picture of preaching presented in the NT indicates that it is nothing other than a persuasive endeavor. The motive of winning men and women to Christ, or to inspire a closer relationship with Him, was clearly the driving motive for those who preached. Paul connected the persuasive power of the preacher to the fear of God (2 Cor 5:11). Obviously, he saw the purpose of preaching not simply as the presentation or illumination of doctrine, but the swaying of the hearer. He preached for a decision. John Broadus says that "the chief part of what we commonly call application is persuasion. It is not enough to convince men of truth, nor enough to make them see how it applies to themselves, and how it might be practicable for them to act it out—but we must 'persuade men'."¹⁹ Richard R. Caemmerer agrees forcefully with his claim that "persuasive speech isn't just for entertainment. It makes a difference in people."²⁰

Some homileticians are proposing a shift in homiletical paradigms. They suggest that we redefine preaching in the autobiographical direction, as the sharing of "my story." In this homiletical expression, the form for presenting the message lies in the sharing of the preacher's personal history, experience, religious search, and so forth, in the belief that from this personal sharing, the hearer will induce the message of the Gospel and come to faith. Though I respect the intent of this effort,

¹⁶C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development: With an Appendix on Eschatology and History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 7. He adds that "the New Testament writers draw a clear distinction between preaching and teaching" (ibid.).

¹⁷For a thorough refutation of Dodd's theory, see Robert Worley, *Preaching and Teaching in the Earliest Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 30-56.

¹⁸Donald E. Demaray, *Introduction to Homiletics*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 39.

¹⁹John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 4th ed., rev. by Vernon L. Stanfield (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 170.

²⁰Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959), 35.

still it appears that this new direction is problematic. The problem is that this subjectivist approach to preaching reduces the preaching event to a personal disquisition which ultimately holds no more authority than the preacher's limited experience. This is not NT preaching. New Testament preaching is not telling "my story," regardless of how interesting it may be. It is telling "God's story" as contained in the Bible, a story that has not only meaning and form but historicity as well. When we preach, we rise to rehearse and relive God's story as acted out in history. This is what the apostle Paul was doing when he proclaimed through one of the early hymns of the church that God "appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory" (1 Tim 3:16). As preachers, we need to remember that our testimony may illustrate the power of the Gospel, but it must never supplant the telling of the Gospel of what God did, in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I also wish to bring a word of encouragement, and if needed, correction to young preachers. You should know that after graduating from seminary you cannot and must not take an academic presentation style into the local church and expect to be effective. Actually, in many ways the primary work of the academicians and the primary work of the homiletician is driven by different purposes. The academician is refining, tracing, and/or distilling, some truth from Scripture. After the message of the text is derived, however laborious that process may have been, the work of the academician is completed. Read any scholarly journal in theology and this fact is self-evident. However, the pastor-preacher-homiletician's work has just begun when the message of the text is discovered. The pastor moves to the necessary second step of adorning, expanding, and contemporizing truth for the nurture of present-day disciples. This critical step is necessary because your listeners do not bear an ancient, but a modern consciousness. They are involved in today's world, not a world of 2000 years ago. Preaching is not doing public exegesis. The message of the text must be transported through a valley twenty centuries wide and applied to today.

By approaching the pulpit with any other mind set than one which says that as preacher, I am also persuader, is to do a disservice to the craft. Every time we enter the pulpit, we stand there with the intention to persuade people for God. Fail in understanding that fact about the essential nature of preaching and we will fail in our ministry of preaching. Nevertheless, whatever understanding we have of preaching will be implemented in the weekly sermon. This leads me to the second question.

What Is a Sermon?

Legend has it that in 1666, King Charles II of England prescribed listening to sermons as the only cure for insomnia. While I cannot vouch for the accuracy of the story, it is said that a churchgoer wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. "I've gone for 30 years now," he wrote, "and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So, I think I'm wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all."

This started a real controversy in the "Letters to the Editor" column, much to the delight of the editor. It went on for weeks until someone wrote: "I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this, they all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do

my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!"

The point here is that preaching plays a dynamic and spiritually nourishing role in the life of the parishioner. This is highlighted in a survey conducted a few decades ago by Pastor Reuel Howe in which lay persons were asked to react to the preaching they listen to weekly. Six concerns were registered regarding pastoral preaching: (1) sermons often contain too many ideas; (2) sermons have too much analysis and too little answer; (3) sermons are too formal and impersonal; (4) preachers assume the hearer has more theological and biblical knowledge and understanding than he or she does; (5) sermons are too propositional, have too few illustrations, and often the illustrations are too literary and not helpful; and (6) too many sermons simply reach a dead end and give no guidance to commitment and action.²¹

The last concern on this list is what merits the attention of our discussion. Here, I will be quite specific and ask you a rather "simple" question, "What is a sermon?" Is it a religious speech? Is it "an act of worship"?²² Is the sermon, according to Webster's *New Riverside Dictionary*, "an often long-winded lecture on duty or behavior."²³ Is a sermon an annoying harangue? Is it like Rousseau's recipe for love, which claims that "you will begin without knowing what you are going to say and end without knowing what you have said?" Ask yourself, "What is a sermon?" Is it just "something," perhaps a "speech," a pastor delivers at the "11:00 o'clock hour?" Is it an unwelcomed lecture? When someone appears to want to lecture us about something in a paternalistic, maternalistic, or condescending way, we sometimes say "OK! OK! I didn't ask for a sermon." So *what* is a sermon? Is it an authoritarian speech? Is it condescending counsel? Is it barking orders from the sacred desk?

Many definitions have been offered as to what a sermon is. William Thompson says simply that it is "a word from the Lord for you."²⁴ He also proffers a more complex definition, saying that it "is the word of God (Jesus Christ) who has been revealed in the pages of the written Word (the Bible) coming to the hearing of people by the proclamation of the Word (preaching)."²⁵ G. N. Banks, former instructor of preaching at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, holds that "a sermon is an interesting, meaningful, and sacred discourse that develops a worthy, religious theme for the purpose of bringing about an appropriate spiritual response on the part of the hearers."²⁶ It is, as Luther once reputedly declared, "Die Verkündigung das Wort Gottes ist das Wort Gottes!"

I would say that, just as the scalpel is the tool of the surgeon, just as the hammer is the tool of the carpenter, just as the brush is the tool of the artist, so too the sermon is a tool of the Holy Spirit in the hands of the preacher. The sermon is not the object of preaching but its servant. When we preach, we are not trying to

²¹Reuel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching* (New York: Seabury, 1967), 26-33.

²²Andrew Blackwood, *The Preparation of Sermons* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1948), 255.

²³*Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary* (New York: Berkley Books, 1984), 623.

²⁴William D. Thompson, *A Listener's Guide to Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 14.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶G. N. Banks, syllabus for the course *Sermon Types and Designs*, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1980, 21.

produce tones worthy of adulation, but messages which touch the listener's hearts and minds. Hence, the sermon is the servant of preaching when it is true to the purpose of all preaching.

One of my favorite definitions of preaching is found in the book *Dramatic Narrative in Preaching* by David Brown. I like his definition because it is short and to the point; but more than its brevity, I believe that it is true to the sample sermons that we have in the NT. Brown says that the sermon is "a call to action on some point of the biblical message."²⁷ He asserts further:

There are two considerations in this definition. The first is that a sermon finds its foundation in the biblical story—either a very select passage or verse, or some broad, thematic type of study. The framework for any sermon is to bring its hearer some further understanding of God through Jesus Christ, of human nature, or of any other theme which is firmly rooted in the biblical message.

Second, a sermon is a call to action. A sermon goes beyond the mere teaching ministry of the pulpit (though any sermon should include teaching). The goal of preaching is not the mere impartation of factual data (however valuable that material may be). A sermon is not solely concerned with broadening of one's knowledge. *It is aimed at bringing people to a point of decision.* It is to move them to do something about the teaching material they have received. Preaching must in some way compel people to take action on what they have heard.²⁸

There we have it! A sermon is a call to action. Clearly, this is the way sermons functioned in the NT. Consider Jesus' sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), Peter's sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2), and Paul's sermon at Mar's Hill (Acts 17). These inspired preachers in Scripture did not seek to entertain, but to call women and men to committed action before God.

Further, not only is the sermon a call to action but it is also the *tool of preaching*. It is the *servant of preaching*. No spirit-filled sermon is an end in itself. The sermon is an expression of God's truth through humans as authoritative witnesses. Prior to His ascension, Jesus left the word of proclamation to the church (Matt 28:19-20). This proclamation was to be the saving announcement of the good news of God's favor toward the world. It was to be carried out through the ministries of word (*kerygma*), service (*diakonia*), and fellowship (*koinonia*). The sermon is but one aspect of the ministry of the church. It is not the only ministry of the church but it functions within the ministry of the total church. As does every other gift, the Spirit-filled sermon never "center stages" the preacher, but calls attention to the Lord of the preacher.

How Can We Increase the Persuasive Impact of Our Preaching?

Finally, we have come to the last question of this presentation. I submit that persuasion may be accomplished through communicating commitment, character, and competence to our listeners.

²⁷David Brown, *Dramatic Narrative in Preaching* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1981), 8.

²⁸Ibid. (Emphasis mine).

Persuasive Preaching Communicates Commitment

Persuasive power is directly tied to the depth of our commitment to Christ. All persuasive power emanates from this center. Our connection with Christ is the secret of power. Some lack power in their preaching because they lack commitment. Paul Sangster, son of W. E. Sangster, wrote of his father that he struggled with the temptation of letting other things steal God's place. Sangster wrote in his journal, "I wanted degrees more than knowledge, and praise rather than equipment for service."²⁹

The key to persuasive power is commitment and the path to commitment is surrender. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "when Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die . . ."³⁰ The key to power is being anointed in the Spirit.

Persuasive Preaching Communicates Character

Our persuasive power is so closely tied to what the Greeks called *ethos* that our effectiveness in pulpit work is directly tied to it. The idea of *ethos* comes from the classical Greek rhetorical theory and it refers to the *perceived* credibility we enjoy as preachers.³¹ Donald Sunukjian puts it this way:

A preacher's *ethos* is the opinion that his listeners have of him as a person. If their opinion of him is high, he will have high *ethos*, or great credibility, with them. This means they will be inclined to believe whatever he says. On the other hand if their opinion of him is low, his *ethos* or credibility will be poor, and they will 'turn him off' even before he speaks.³²

What is elusive about this concept of *ethos* is that it is a *perceived quality*. Therefore, as preachers we need to be keenly aware of what contributes to, or what detracts from credibility. In short, we must engage in a credibility-building program with parishioners.

What factors build the preacher's credibility? Besides commitment, three other standards are absolutely important: (1) Faithfulness to one's word. This is an important building block of credibility. To promise only what is in our power to deliver, and then to deliver on those promises, are critical to enhancing personal credibility. (2) Family life that demonstrates our capacity to love others. Much of the NT is devoted to issues in family life because the management of the family is the training ground for credible leadership in the work of the church. The preacher who treats her or his spouse in *any* way contrary to the Gospel jeopardizes his/her credibility. (3) Fairness in dealing with people. The preacher should not belong to any faction in the local church. Is the preacher fair or partial in dealing with the disciplinary matters of the church? To show preferential treatment to certain people in the local church while being severe toward others, is perhaps one of the quickest way to lose credibility in leadership. Commitment and consecration are keys to high-impact preaching. But there is a final principle that must be acknowledged.

²⁹Paul Sangster, *Doctor Sangster* (London: Epworth, 1962), 90.

³⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1959), 79.

³¹Donald R. Sunukjian, "The Credibility of the Preacher," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (July-September 1982): 256.

³²*Ibid.*

Persuasive Preaching Communicates Competence

Sunikjian shows that speakers may communicate competency “by means of an attractive appearance, a fluent delivery, an organized message, and an evident awareness of human events.”³³ Let us analyze this statement.

1. Personal appearance is so self-evident that not much comment is necessary. However, what is often neglected by preachers is the attractiveness of the *materials* which they allow to represent them. How does your church bulletin look? How does your newsletter look? People will not be excited about evangelism if the handbills are unattractive.

2. Delivery is another element of persuasive preaching. Is the delivery confident? Passionate? Earnest? I once saw a cartoon of a preacher whose church once had 500 members but now had a mere two persons in attendance, being told by his associate, “Well, pastor, I guess it doesn’t help to end every sermon with ‘But what do I know?’”

3. Another way to increase persuasiveness is to be clear and organized in our preaching. Being “easy to follow” is critical to influencing people. Are our sermons clearly and carefully designed, or are they amoebic, free-form, or gelatinous? Good sturdy structure is a tremendous aid to creating a “listener friendly” message.

4. Engagement with the real world is critical to the effectiveness of preachers. We bridge two worlds every time we effectively present the word of God. Our persuasiveness is greatly increased when the listener firmly believes that the preacher is connected to today’s world as well as the world beyond. Persuasive power may be enhanced by accessing the local vocabulary of the people we address weekly. Frankly, there is nothing inherently sacred about using “thee” or “thou.” Wise is the preacher who utilizes the words, images, and parlance of his/her listeners. We need to be attuned to the words and phrases that are familiar to the people we minister to. Further, the technical jargon of theology may be appropriate to the classroom but should not be the standard fare from the sacred desk.

Conclusion

Do the following exercise as a way of analyzing your manuscript for its persuasive potential. Take the manuscript for your next sermon and ask and answer the following questions honestly and completely:

1. Is this sermon based on the clear message of the text? Does this sermon develop one of the implications of the text? Is the text cited in the sermon a mere pretext for what I really want to say?

2. What is the objective of this sermon? What form is used to accomplish that objective: narrative, didactic, kerygmatic, polemic, or apology?

3. Is this sermon “a call to action”? What am I inviting the listener to do? Is that invitation based on the theme developed in this sermon?

4. How many examples of the local vocabulary can I identify in this sermon?

5. What is the strong first sentence of this sermon? What is the strong final sentence of this sermon?

³³Ibid., 257.

By practicing these principles and rigorously critiquing our messages, we will increase the persuasive power of our preaching to the local congregations.

For further information contact the author/presenter at Lpollard@llu.edu.