

Experiential Preaching

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The preaching of the gospel speaks to the hearts of God's people. This is what makes preaching unique. Because preaching is the highest form of communication, all the rules of language, logic, and oratory apply. Through the preaching of the gospel, the congregation is instructed in the knowledge of the Bible and they become more familiar with the truth of that Word. All of this must lead them to worship the One True God, revealed in His Word. Worship is an act of faith, personal and corporate response to God. For this, the heart of the hearer must be touched.

Who can touch that heart, but God!

He does work in our hearts by means of the preaching of the gospel.

The preacher must be keenly aware of this dimension in his preaching. The goal of preaching is not accomplished if the members of the congregation congratulate the preacher for a job well done (for a well-organized sermon which carefully expounded the truth of the text, which applied that text to the life of the congregation, and was eloquently delivered). Indeed the preacher needs encouragement in his work and must know that hard work is much appreciated by the congregation. He does not need a weekly "ego trip" which gives him the adrenalin for another week. Rather, the goal of preaching is accomplished only when the preacher and the congregation are brought to their knees in repentance and are reconciled to God by the good news of the blood of the Lamb. We must hear Jesus, not the preacher. Only then will the comfort of the Word produce lasting effect in the lives of God's people. The evidence of such growth in sanctification is the greatest reward for faithful preaching. The preacher and congregation know that such fruits are exclusively divine. Pride is dashed to pieces and thankful humility takes its proper place.

The preacher is a living tool in the hands of God. The more the message fills his heart, the more he comes to the pulpit with the burden of a message

from God to His precious people. The more he wrestles with the Word of God and its significance in his own life and as he sees its impact upon the lives of the congregation, the more he will bring the living Word.

That preaching will not be a dry-as-dust lecture on abstract theology. Neither will it be a brilliant analysis of a certain historical event recorded in the Bible, an analysis which contains a moral lesson for the congregation. In all instances, whether the passage is Old Testament or New Testament, whether historical or hortatory, it will be God's Word.

The term, experiential preaching (sometimes also called experimental), is not commonly used among us. It is more commonplace in the English and Puritan tradition—which has some connotations (a mystical tendency) which we would not endorse. As I listen to some criticism, read articles, enjoy discussions on how to evaluate the preaching in a given church or our churches in common, it seems to me that we are grappling for words. The old doctrinal-practical dichotomy for describing sermons just does not fit. Every now and then we hear a criticism that the sermon is just too doctrinal, that we need practical preaching. Most of us do not know what is meant by “practical” preaching. More helpful is the term “applied” preaching. This is helpful because the entire Word of God, whether the passage is of a more doctrinal nature or whether it deals with the daily life of the saints, must be applied to the church which has gathered in worship. The preacher fails in his task to expound the Word of God if he does not carefully and with much diligence tell the congregation how this affects their lives and how they are to respond to such truth.

The idea of experiential preaching must be distinguished from the foregoing along these lines. The emphasis rests upon the preacher experiencing himself what the gospel has to say. He personally knows the sorrow of repentance for sin. He knows the temptations of the flesh. He knows the amazing depth of forgiving love. He knows the joy of obedient living over against greed and self-seeking. This experience affects his own preaching, as he deals with the subject at hand. He shows proper emotions;

his heart is involved as well as his mind. He has spiritual sensitivity which becomes evident in the pulpit. When the passage deals with conflicts, he can speak of them in a real and sincere way because he has had the same conflicts. When these are applied to the congregation, he does not say, "you people," divorcing himself from the message, but uses "we," and thereby speaks to himself as well.

Such experiential preaching builds a bridge between the preacher and the congregation as he brings the Word of God. The message of the sermon must always be a careful exposition of the Scriptures. If you will, solid exegesis is the skeleton of every sermon, it holds everything together. The message must always be what God has to say to His people. That is determined by His Word. It forms the content of our faith, and that in turn controls our life of obedience. As this is being done in the sermon, the preacher deals with this in such a way that everyone in the audience knows that what he is saying is important. It deals with life and death, heaven and hell, faith and unbelief; and that is most important to the preacher and everyone sitting in the audience.

If we look about in the Holy Scriptures to find examples of this, we could do no better than to sit at the feet of the Lord Jesus Himself. Think of these stirring words: "And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when he saw the multitude, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd," and this moved Him to say, pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that He may send forth reapers (Matthew 9:35-38). The burden Jesus felt for His people affected the way He brought the message. When He began to experience the hostility of the Jews, He pointedly said to His disciples, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). As He led His disciples in prayer (Christ taught through His prayers), He identified the glory which He had with the Father as the glory He sought to give to them through the deep way of His suffering and death (John 17:5).

An Old Testament example of such experiential preaching is the use of the song Moses sang upon his departure at Mt. Nebo (Deuteronomy 32). What a testimony of Jehovah's faithfulness as experienced by that man of God and expressed to Israel at his time of death!

When Paul "preached" to the Roman Christians concerning the salvation of the Jews, he expressed it so eloquently and passionately: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart. For I could wish myself accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh..." (Romans 9:1-3). He experienced that sincerely and it showed in the way he said it.

Our Reformed fathers make reference to this same idea in connection with Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 35. The question is raised, "But may not images be tolerated in the churches, as books to the laity? Answer, No: for we must not pretend to be wiser than God, who will have his people taught not by dumb images, but by the lively preaching of his word." There are many factors in what makes preaching lively. The living God comes with the Word of life to quicken dead sinners. The vehicle of such communication is not dumb images, but a living minister as well, And since he is a living instrument, all his previous experiences, his upbringing, his own joys and sorrows, those which he shares with the people of God as pastor, all contribute to and influence the way in which he relates the Word of God to the people of God.

Let me illustrate the truthfulness of this. When the pastor experiences the death of a member of the congregation and is asked to present a message at the funeral, that message is going to be highly charged with what he has just experienced concerning death and glory. The circumstances prepare him for the effective communication of the gospel. It is not theory, abstract, or just an idea. Death is real, and God's people need comfort in that reality. He will struggle with his own sorrows, but that will prepare him to bring the Word of God powerfully and meaningfully. The same is true in dealing with pastoral

concerns during the week. If the pastor is going to preach experientially, as the Word lives in his own soul and as he desires the same word to live in the souls of the congregation, he will be spiritually enhanced as he cries with those who sorrow and rejoices with those who rejoice.

Another important aspect is to allow the particular passage to fill one's soul. An important discipline for the pastor to learn is to select the passage early in the week, to read the context carefully, meditate upon it while taking a walk, allow the Word of God to become part of his being as he goes about his activities as pastor. It is amazing how the different ways of saying it, ways to apply it, even specific illustrations which relate to the everyday experience of God's people can effectively communicate to God's people the message from God. When the pastor is aware of the need for the preaching to be experiential, he will incorporate the things in his outline and communicate them through the message.

In conclusion, it is important that however the personal experiences of the pastor affect his preaching, it must never draw attention to itself. The focal point of preaching must always be this: What saith Jehovah?