

Preaching Worth Listening To

by

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Different versions of fundamentalism are characterized by different visions of preaching. Fundamentalists do not agree among themselves about what makes good preaching. To some, good preaching is primarily evangelism. To others it is primarily exhortation. To still others it is primarily explanation of the biblical text. Some envision preaching primarily as oratory, some see it as entertainment, and some believe it to be mainly exposition.

There has always been a regional and associational element to these differences. Exposition has been more common in the North, while evangelism and exhortation have tended to dominate preaching in the South. Presbyterians and groups that came out of the Northern Baptist Convention have typically been more centered on the text, whereas the groups that owe their origin to the influence of J. Frank Norris have tended to center on issues and applications. The further east one moves, the more oratorical preaching becomes, while the West has fostered a more folksy style of preaching that incorporates a good bit of storytelling.

The last two generations of fundamentalists (my own middle-aged generation and the upcoming generation of so-called "young fundamentalists") have reacted against the theatrics and weak exposition that have sometimes characterized fundamentalist preaching. For more than thirty years we have witnessed a push toward a more biblical, textual, and doctrinal type of preaching. In several branches of fundamentalism, pulpit pyrotechnics have fallen into disrepute. Mainstream fundamentalists have largely abandoned the abusive confrontationalism that used to pass for courageous pulpit work. Manipulative emotional appeals are viewed with increasing suspicion. A more thoughtful and deliberate presentation is becoming the order of the day.

This alteration, however, has led to problems of its own. In order to create and hold interest, much of the older fundamentalist preaching relied upon precisely those elements that are now being abandoned. While the new preaching certainly is more faithful to Scripture, it can sometimes become bookish, pedantic, and even dull. Of course, monotony is not uniquely the province of either fundamentalists or expository preachers. Still, we who are the most concerned that the Word of God be preached should also be the most concerned that the Word of God be heard, understood, applied, and lived.

Earlier this month I was asked by the American Association of Christian Colleges and Seminaries to address the question of how to balance content and foundation with practical application in preaching. I agreed to address this question, but the more that I thought about it, the more I sensed a false dichotomy in the way that we were asking it. I am not at all sure that content needs to be balanced with application. Without content there is nothing to apply. Without application, all content is pointless. To damage either element is to damage both.

Therefore, I decided to risk being accused of false advertising by changing the question. Let us assume that wish to communicate the maximum of both content and application, rightly joined. The question as I came to see it is, What can and should we do to hold the interest of our listeners when we preach? That is the question that I addressed for the AACCS, and after that meeting Dr. Burggraaf asked whether I might repeat that presentation for you. I have agreed to perform that task. How do we preach for interest without slighting content and application?

Make no mistake: holding the attention of an audience is the duty of the speaker. We speakers are the ones who ask for attention. It is only right that we justify our request. Sometimes we think that the message is its own justification, but that is not completely true. What good does it do to claim that we have a word from God, if we present that word so opaquely that people cannot understand it or cannot see its relationship to their lives?

If we cannot justify our demand for attention, then we are simply wasting our audience's time. Think of it: if you are speaking pointlessly for only one half hour to only sixteen people, you will have wasted an entire working day. Expand the number in the audience to a mere eighty, and you have wasted an entire forty-hour work week. This is worse than an inconvenience: it is a sin. You are both stealing time and bearing false witness.

Of course, some of the things that speakers do in order to gain or hold attention are not ethical. Preachers regularly create interest by drawing attention to themselves. Inasmuch as we cannot magnify Christ by seeking to make ourselves impressive, this too is a sin.

But there are ways of arousing interest that can direct attention to the subject, in this case, the Word of God. Rather than distracting us from the message, ethical ways of holding attention will actually help us to focus upon the message, understand it, and remember it. These techniques are not mysterious or esoteric. With practice and work, any public speaker can master them. I am going to discuss some of them under the three rubrics of *structure*, *delivery*, and *imagination*.

By structure I simply mean the liberal art of rhetoric. Every good preacher has to master this art. Too many people assume that rhetoric deals only with verbal ornaments and flourishes. Such orator's tricks, however, are more properly the province of sophistry than of rhetoric. The discipline of rhetoric teaches us how to present ideas coherently so that people can perceive, first, how the ideas are connected to one another, and second, how the ideas

are connected to the listeners' interests. Through the right use of rhetoric the speaker enters into a covenant of meaning with his audience that enables his auditors to glimpse truth in its correct proportions and to perceive their own relationship to it.

Think of it this way. Each sermon is a little world of its own, a tiny cosmos ordered by the preacher in view of the text. Rightly constructed, this little world provides a lens through which the audience's attention is drawn toward and focused upon some aspect of spiritual reality that the text itself emphasizes. The sermon must direct the listener's attention to this one thing, but not mislead him into thinking that it is the only thing. In other words, a good sermon can get listeners to think specifically about one thing, while not forgetting that other things are also important.

A single sermon cannot focus attention upon everything that is in a text of Scripture. Indeed, if it is to be effective, the sermon must dwell upon only one great idea. This idea must be so vital that it entails some alteration of life for the hearers. The whole point of the sermon is to ask for that alteration in life. Every legitimate expository sermon is an extended exhortation, bringing exactly one biblical requirement to bear upon the audience. An effective preacher will state this demand so clearly that his audience cannot possibly misunderstand it. He will master the technique of encapsulating it in a single sentence and phrasing it with force.

The structure of the sermon should provide a clear map to the preacher's thought (which, of course, must reflect the thought of the text). It should also answer one of the two questions that all people ask when they are told that they ought to do something: *Why?* and *How?* The main divisions of the sermon should articulate the principal considerations from the biblical text that give either the *reasons why* or else the *ways how* the demand of the sermon must be met.

What I am suggesting is that every good, expository sermon asks for a decision. Indeed, the element of confrontation and decision is exactly what distinguishes a sermon from a mere lecture. The requested decision may not be a huge one, but this is where our understanding of the normal Christian life comes into play. If we believe that progressive sanctification and spiritual growth are the vital categories in Christian living, then we will be aiming for a constant stream of small decisions that eventually will alter the course of a believer's life. The moral basis for these decisions will arise naturally from the text as we expound it one section at a time.

This stands in contrast to the revivalist vision of the Christian life. Revivalism does not emphasize incremental growth. It teaches a kind of "quantum spirituality" in which the normal Christian life is marked by huge decisions made in moments of crisis. This view of the Christian life tends to produce a style of preaching that aims for the Big Decision in every sermon, and this means precipitating a crisis in every sermon. It results in Christians who make the same decisions over and over again. Because they are not growing normally, however, their decisions don't usually seem to stick very well.

Our duty is to preach all the counsel of God. That means the whole Bible. The whole Bible shapes our thinking. The whole Bible confronts us with change. Most of those changes are incremental in nature. This does not mean that there is never a right occasion for a crisis sermon that asks for a major decision, but it does imply that crisis preaching should not be the norm.

The Bible asks us to change. Therefore, good preaching should also ask us to change. It should lead us to examine ourselves in view of the text and to amend our lives accordingly. Sound structure—ethical use of rhetoric—is an essential component in that kind of preaching.

Transferring serious ideas from one mind to another is not a natural event. All sorts of obstacles and distractions intrude so badly that misunderstanding is a normal state of affairs. Listeners block out speakers so habitually that the act is nearly a reflex. Bodies grow fatigued and minds wander.

The burden rests with the communicator, in this case the preacher, to eliminate as many obstacles as possible. The expositor has a duty not only to be faithful to the text and to expose its meaning, but also to guide the listener through the transfer of ideas. Rhetoric is the sharp knife with which the preacher blazes a clear trail through the confusion, obstacles, and distractions along the mental pathway.

We have now seen one ethical way in which a sermon can be made interesting without taking anything away from biblical content or godly focus. The preacher can gain and hold the attention of his audience through the use of proper rhetorical structure. He can also create and sustain interest through a polished delivery.

By a polished delivery, I do not mean the sort of hysterics that sometimes occur in fundamentalist preaching. I do not mean that the preacher should climb up on the pulpit, walk across the pews, wave his handkerchief in the air, or any other such self-indulgent nonsense. These antics do indeed gain attention, but they gain it for the preacher and not for the message.

Nevertheless, speaking in a monotone or standing stock-still does nothing to increase the virtue or effectiveness of the message. If he is to hold the attention of his audience, the preacher must be relaxed enough to speak naturally and animated enough to speak energetically. These characteristics must become so transparent that a listener's attention is not drawn to the preacher, but rather fixed upon what he is saying. Pulpit antics are not the only things that draw attention away from the sermon. When people get the impression that a preacher is laboring, they begin to focus upon him and not upon his message.

A man cannot be a good preacher if he is not a competent public speaker. Poise is a skill that speakers learn. Rarely does it come naturally—almost everyone acquires it through practice. That means that anyone who wishes to become a good preacher must practice speaking.

Notice that I did not say “practice preaching.” The skills that are required for all public addresses can be transferred directly to preaching. Matters such as the use of the voice, precise diction, and good eye contact are not merely decorations that we add to speeches or sermons. Rather, they are the substance of good communication. A would-be preacher should seize every opportunity to practice these skills until he has mastered them. The setting and topic do not much matter. The mechanics of delivering a sermon are identical to those for addressing a Boy Scout troop, a garden club, or a chapter of Rotary. A man who hopes to become a good preacher should constantly hunt for opportunities to speak in public. The more varied those opportunities and the more diverse the settings, the better his skills will be sharpened.

One of the best situations for learning may actually exist within the preacher’s own home. If a preacher has young children, they represent an ideal opportunity to develop an animated, natural delivery. Now, I am *not* suggesting that the developing preacher should subject young children to his own practice sermons. What he can do, however, is to tell them stories. Good stories. Stories about knights and dragons and fair maidens. The skills that he needs in order to delight a child with a story are the same skills that he needs in order to communicate the Word of God so that people will listen.

The most natural delivery usually stems from the sparing use of notes. With notable exceptions, very few people can read aloud as naturally as they can extemporize, and even fewer can write for the speaking voice. The heavy use of manuscripts or detailed notes is almost always a narcotic for the audience.

Many men feel that if they are cut loose from detailed notes, they will not know what to say. Some are afraid of blanking out, while others worry that their sermon could degenerate into a disjointed ramble. I’ve noticed, however, that even men with notes are quite capable of rambling, and more than one manuscripted sermon has left me blank at the end.

The solution is twofold. First, the preacher must be well studied and well read. He must know the details of his passage to a far greater degree than he will ever be able to express in any sermon. Second, he must have thought about and planned carefully the rhetorical structure of his sermon. If he cannot say without looking what specific decision he is going to ask the audience to make, then he is not ready to preach. If he cannot readily articulate two or three or four reasons why this decision is important—or two or three or four ways in which this decision can be implemented—then he is not ready to preach.

So far I have suggested two ways in which we can legitimately gain and hold attention for our preaching. The first is by rightly employing the liberal art of rhetoric. The second is by developing a relaxed, animated delivery. I now wish to explore a third way, and that is by appealing to the moral imagination.

Perhaps the term “moral imagination” requires some explanation. We all know that the imagination is the mental faculty of “imaging” or conceptualizing the unseen. I am going to distinguish three forms of imagination.

The “ordinary” imagination enables us to conceptualize real entities that we simply have not encountered. Thus, we might imagine a raccoon to be “like a large cat with a sharp nose, a furry mask around its eyes, and a ringed tail.” People regularly employ the ordinary imagination to expand their knowledge of aspects of the world that they have never seen. We can imagine Paris, black holes, and birds of paradise, even if we have never encountered any of these things.

The “idyllic” imagination enables us to conceptualize entities that we have not seen because they do not exist. No one has ever seen a real dragon, but we could all describe one, perhaps as a “gigantic lizard with bat’s wings, capable of exhaling fire.” The idyllic imagination helps people to escape from the real world and to locate themselves temporarily in a world of fantasy. Such a fantastic world may be populated with creatures such as the Cyclops, the unicorn, and the space alien.

The “moral” imagination enables us to conceptualize entities that are real but intrinsically intangible because they belong to the moral sphere. What does courage look like? How can we envision sacrifice, forgiveness, freedom, or justice? We must be able to imagine such things if we are going to have any notion of them at all. And we must imagine them correctly.

The power of the most effective preaching lies exactly in its ability to engage the moral imagination. If preaching is going to be practical, and if preaching is going to sustain interest legitimately, then it must reach the affections. People only choose and act when their affections have been moved. The moral imagination is the gateway to the affections. Every non-manipulative appeal to the affections must begin by properly furnishing the moral imagination. If we attempt to circumvent this faculty, we will end up manipulating people by appealing to their appetites.

An illustration may help. When John pointed to Jesus and said, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,” he did not utter these words into a vacuum. He spoke to people who had in their minds a rich imagery concerning the sacrificial use of lambs. They understood the principle of vicarious sacrifice. They knew what it meant for a lamb to take away sin. Because they possessed these imaginative categories, they should have understood what John meant by pointing out Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. While this understanding would not guarantee a right response to Jesus, a right response would not be possible without it.

By way of contrast, think of the Aztec custom of human sacrifice. The Aztecs sacrificed some 20,000 captured and unwilling people every year, usually by cutting the beating heart out of a live victim. These sacrifices were thought of as a kind of nourishment to ensure the rising of the sun each day, thereby delaying the end of the world.

Both peoples—Jews and Aztecs—could hear the same words, “Jesus is your sacrifice.” They would, however, understand these words in radically different ways. The two peoples had entirely different notions of sacrifice, entirely different notions of the role of the victim, entirely different notions of the nature of God. Their moral imaginations were furnished with fundamentally different images. What made understanding transparent for a Jew would make understanding nearly impossible for an uninstructed Aztec. The Aztec would not be in a position to respond rightly to Jesus until the moral imagination had been furnished with the proper notion of sacrifice.

Reaching and shaping the moral imagination is one of the keys to great preaching. By changing the way that people imagine or envision moral reality, we open up their hearts to love and choose the right things. The moral imagination is the door to understanding.

The moral imagination works by means of examples and comparisons. Again, consider the notion of Christ as a sacrifice. The sacrifices of the Levitical system provide an example that clarifies the notion of propitiation. John then compares Jesus to that example. Example and comparison are critical to understanding moral reality.

This is one of the reasons that so much of the Bible is written as imaginative literature. The Old Testament presents books packed with stories, followed by books packed with poetry, followed by the prophets who mix stories, poetry, and the vivid images of apocalyptic. The New Testament opens with more books of stories and closes with an apocalypse. In between fall the New Testament epistles, the most sustained discursive section in the Bible. (By *discursive* I mean literature that aims to deploy ideas and to develop arguments.) Even in the epistles, the discursive element rests upon imaginative categories, as we see with special clarity in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The Bible is filled with images through which God discloses His character. “The Lord is a man of war” (Ex. 15:3), “The Lord is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1), “I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up” (Isa. 6:1), “I am the door” (Jn. 10:9), “In His right hand were seven stars” (Rev. 1:16). It is jammed with episodes that illustrate God’s nature, such as His sovereignty in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, His utter holiness at Sinai, His justice in avenging Naboth, His faithfulness in sustaining David. Whole passages picture aspects of God’s personhood. Genesis 1 and 2 reveal Him as the good Creator who blesses us and invites our trust. Isaiah 5 shows Him as the disappointed farmer. Hosea depicts Him as the husband who is faithful to a harlot wife. Daniel 4 and 5 show Him as the mighty ruler who sets up kings and topples them at His will.

Even the discursive sections of Scripture grow from the deep roots of biblical imagination. Consider terms like *redemption*, *propitiation*, *reconciliation*, *regeneration*, and *adoption*. These words are the theological stock-in-trade of the New Testament. But each word evokes an image, and the more clearly we perceive the image, the more powerfully it will change our perception of God and His work. Liberation from slavery, satisfaction of justice, cessation of hostility, birth into the family, enjoying the privileges of an heir—the more vividly we can conceptualize these realities, the better we shall understand both what God has done for us and who we are in Christ.

My address today cannot become a how-to seminar on the development of the moral imagination. That is a task for a different lecture, or, more likely, series of lectures. If we want lessons, however, we should begin by reading and analyzing literature that is written to shape people’s vision of moral reality. We should notice how *The Scarlet Letter* provides images of integrity and hypocrisy; how *Moby Dick* casts light upon the deceitfulness of revenge; how Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* shapes Scrooge as a paradigm for reform; how *Les Miserables* pictures redemption. While we may not wish to use their precise images, the authors of these and many other volumes are masters of the moral imagination. We can learn from them how it is reached and shaped.

If our preaching is to be as effective as it ought to be, we must find ways of exploiting the biblical imagery, of explaining and illustrating it, of making it the grid through which God’s people view reality. We should discipline ourselves to look for the images that are already present in Scripture. Those images are lamps that we must ignite so that they might cast their light upon the person and work of the Triune God.

Is preaching primarily exposition or is it primarily exhortation? I believe that this is a false dichotomy. Good expository preaching is always about exhortation, and the only exhortation that is worth hearing must justify itself in exposition. Doctrine must point to practice and practice must grow out of doctrine. We do not need to balance these two: every sermon should maximize both.

Good preaching never separates content from conduct, orthodoxy from orthopraxy. Good preaching furnishes the mind in order to move the will. But first we must reach the ear, gain the interest, and hold the attention of the audience. I have tried to articulate three ways in which we can keep attention focused upon the content while we aim to move the will. We ought to master the liberal art of rhetoric, guiding our listeners on a clear path through the forest of ideas. We ought to polish our speaking skills until we can make ourselves into nearly invisible lenses, focusing our audience’s attention upon the great idea of the text. Most importantly, we ought to light the lamp of moral imagination, understanding how unseen moral realities can be presented with such clear brilliance that they seize listeners and illumine their minds and hearts to truth.

I do not question for a moment that the Holy Spirit is the One Who applies the truth and produces conviction. In fact, I need to emphasize that He is not merely an adjunct who blesses our methods: He is the agent Who does God’s work. But neither is He the supernatural cure-all for slipshod efforts. He uses tools, and we ourselves are among those tools. We ought to present ourselves to Him as the sharpest, most highly polished, and brightest instruments that we possibly can.