

Introduction

During my years as a student at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York I developed a deep interest in the work of biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, and the work that is involved in making the shift from the critical study of Scripture to the preparation and delivery of sermons. That interest led me temporarily into a Ph.D. program in Old Testament at Columbia University, but eventually into a career as a pastor for the past thirty-three years and a teacher of homiletics for the past twenty-five years. While there have been many career shifts and changes in locale along the way, one thing has remained constant: a deep interest in the shift from the work of biblical exegesis to the work of sermon design and delivery.

My first published attempt to give expression to this lifelong interest came with my 2001 volume, *Living Water for Thirsty Souls: Unleashing the Power of Exegetical Preaching* (Judson Press). I am excited about the prospects of continuing to examine the process of moving from text to sermon with this *Elements of Preaching* volume from Fortress Press. I am deeply committed to the concept of biblical preaching regardless of the sermon form that might be employed. Whether one is engaged in expository, doctrinal, topical, dialectic, narrative, biographical, or inductive/deductive forms of preaching, I believe that preaching is best done when the sermon rests upon the insights and authority of a biblical text. How to bridge the gap between the end of the process of exegesis and the preparation and delivery of the sermon is what this volume has set out to examine.

This book will be broken into three chapters, each of which will examine a different aspect of the process of shaping the basic claim or the central theme or message of the sermon. The first chapter will ask the question, "What to preach?" and will examine how preachers can arrive at a basic theme or message around which their sermon can be built. The second chapter will ask the question, "So what?" and will seek to make the point that solid content alone is not enough if the sermon does not make an almost immediate existential/experiential connection with the listeners. The third chapter will raise the question,

“Now what?” and will remind preachers that sermons are not complete until they have pointed the listeners to some appropriate next steps that should be taken as result of having heard that sermon.

Each of those three chapters will be informed by the three goals offered by Aristotle in his reflections on rhetoric; *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. The chapter on “What to preach?” will reflect on Aristotle’s use of the word *logos* and will make the case that every sermon must be based upon a clear and compelling claim that is rooted in Scripture and that is culturally relevant for the audience to which it is being directed. The chapter on “So what?” will draw from Aristotle’s understanding of *pathos* and will make the case that sermons must be preached with passion and enthusiasm, and must also seek to ignite passion and enthusiasm in those who hear the message. Finally, the chapter on “Now what?” will use Aristotle’s concept of *ethos* to imagine the kinds of next steps that listeners might take as a result of having heard the word of the Lord. Sermons are not simply to be heard; they are to create some response on the part of those who have heard.

I am deeply indebted to several people who first ignited my interest in this critical juncture in the preaching process. First, I acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. James A. Sanders, who remains the best Bible scholar I have ever encountered. His lectures on the Old Testament were delivered with the precision of a classical scholar, but also with the fervor of a southern revivalist. It was a joy to watch him at work, and I am certain that his influence on my life and thought continues to this day. So far as preaching influences are concerned, I was blessed to be alive and in my formative years as a preacher in New York City when Samuel Proctor, Gardner Taylor, William A. Jones, Sandy Ray, Ernest Campbell, David H. C. Read, and William Sloane Coffin were preaching in that city. I can think of no time in American history when I would rather have been alive so far as it concerns the richness of the pulpits of New York City.

Week after week for five wonderful years I was able to wander that great city and observe these master preachers at work. They were doing the very thing I have been trying to understand—solid biblical exegesis resulting in solid sermon content that challenged the mind, filled the soul, and lifted the spirit to heights sublime. How did they accomplish that affect? What were their devices, their techniques, their styles of sermon design and delivery? Those were the questions

I was asking then. Those are the answers I have been pursuing for twenty-five years as a teacher of preaching. Those are the questions that hovered over me as I wrote this book.

I am equally grateful to Dr. Fred Finks, who was the President at Ashland Theological Seminary when I was hired there as a professor of preaching. It was my belief that I would do my best work as a teacher of preaching if I could remain actively involved in pastoral ministry and the weekly task of preaching to the same congregation. Not every seminary president would agree to such an arrangement, and not every professor of preaching feels as I do about maintaining this balance between the classroom and the local church. He was willing to take a chance on such an arrangement, however, and I have worked hard since he hired me in 1996 to live up to his trust and confidence. The members of Antioch Baptist Church of Cleveland, Ohio, hold an equally cherished place in my heart. They, too, agreed to this shared ministry between themselves and the seminary. I have been with them since 1987, and our friendship and partnership in the service of Jesus Christ only deepens as the years go by.

I am thankful to Fortress Press for the chance to be a part of this series of books that grapples with various aspects of the preaching task. It is an honor to be associated with the men and women whose volumes will comprise this series. It has been a special delight to work with O. Wesley Allen who not only drafted me to be a part of this project, but who then offered editorial assistance that was so expert that there were times I could not tell where my words ended and his suggested changes began. He deserves immense credit for any compliments this book may receive. Any shortcomings and failures belong entirely to me.