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Festival Sermons and Doctrine

Forging Connections

Sermons are dangerous things . . .—George Herbert[1]

Christianity is a way of living: not a doctrinal conclusion.—Mary McDermott Shideler[2]

What Is Doctrinal Proclamation?

This work proposes to show how lively doctrinal expression is intrinsic to the content of sound principal-festival proclamation. The necessary groundwork for such proclamation entails attention to the nature and definitions of both preaching and doctrine. This chapter will explore both topics, by way of laying the definitional foundation for the preacher's work with the festivals. In using both sermonic and doctrinal resources, it is critical to understand their linguistic and theological terms.

As listeners hear proclamation, they are hungry for more than just a biblical recounting of the text or historical information. Proclamation is insufficient if it resorts only to retelling the biblical events minus doctrinal interpretation since that severs the sermon from any relationship to the massive doctrinal history of the church. Hearers want to know what this all *means* for today's living in a contemporary culture that offers daily evidence of non-Christian views or even anti-Christian actions and speech. Doctrinal proclamation responds to that desire for interpreted meaning. Like the consistent electrical impulse that moves the human heart, these doctrines pulsate regularly through

the life of the church, regulating and reflecting humanity's relationships with God.

The increased appearance of Bibles in church pew racks and the growing ranks of the faithful with Bible, pen, and paper in hand featured in religious TV programs present contrary evidence to those who would claim doctrine is of no interest today. Unfortunately, there is often little doctrinal education provided for adults in most parishes. Well-educated and sophisticated human beings often come to preaching with only a teenage or confirmation-age level of faith education. Proclaiming the festivals doctrinally can assist listeners in maturing in their knowledge and practice of their faith in today's global arena of multiple religious discourses.

Doctrine gives shape, meaning, and challenge to the church and what it means to preach and live out the Christian faith, not only as individuals but also as the Christian community in its many expressions. In their most life-giving, homiletical sense, doctrines are lively in that they are not mere historical recapitulations of basic beliefs but remain always porous and open to fresh insights and claims. Doctrinal development is reflective of the ongoing revelatory work of the Holy Spirit to humanity concerning God.

The Vocabulary of Proclamation

Any references to preaching in this work are implicitly or explicitly related to a large historical cache of descriptive linguistic terms that have developed, as with the faith, over centuries. Anyone exploring the area of historical homiletics will note such words as *sermon*, *homily*, *oration*, *treatise*, *lectures*, *instructions*, *addresses*, and *exposition*. All of these terms refer variously to some form of public proclamation, whether to a monastic community, a local parish, or before a convocation of theologians. In some cases in the early years of Christianity, custom dictated that materials received from an author would be read aloud in a variety of settings.

The ecclesial source of a work of proclamation also affects its nomenclature. For example, in the West, one will find the designation of "sermon" for public proclamation, while in the early Eastern church the more rhetorically selective word used is sometimes "oration." Frequently, the designation used for the proclamation will give a clue about its length and content as well.

A homily, by way of content designation, is traditionally considered to be an exposition of a scriptural passage in which the preacher moves verse by verse through the biblical text. Homily has also come to be understood today in terms of its duration, which is to say something much briefer than either a sermon or an oration. One need only compare the few words of an Augustinian homily to the pages of an oration given by Gregory Nazianzen to see the difference.

In the fervor of sharing and spreading the gospel, few distinctions were generally made about how to get the message disseminated. Historical teaching and preaching often exhibited very indefinite boundaries (which has always been true to some extent historically). Since it is not always possible to ascertain whether a selection might have been actually preached, some materials used in this work relating directly to the purposes of the festivals may have come to the audience indirectly. The terms used in the original document will be cited as such in this book.

The Vocabulary of Doctrine

Throughout this book, the word *doctrine* will be used interchangeably with both *dogma* (from the Greek, meaning "opinion" or "belief") and *teaching*. In some quarters *doctrine* has a more formal denotation, while *teaching* can mean preaching on the import of the doctrine for the faithful. Doctrines understood and taught as a group are often referred to as systematic theology. Older, scholarly resources on doctrine will frequently refer to Latin and Greek terms for doctrine via the classical rhetorical tradition. Latin refers to *loci* (singular, *locus*), a word that continues to be used in English, meaning an area or subject of specific topical interest. The similar word in Greek, *topoi* (singular *topos*) has the same meaning, indicating a subject area from which arguments might be developed. One of the best-known and influential works on doctrine historically important to the Reformation is Philipp Melanchthon's *Loci*.[3]

What exactly is the nature of doctrine? *It is both statements and processes*. Doctrinal development is a theological process that filters history, revelation, experience, and biblical materials to result in specific articulations of theology (study of God) and anthropology (the study of humanity). Definitions of doctrine are varied and dependent on the functions and roles theologians believe they serve. Basically, the

development of doctrine emerges out of human experiences of God. These start in embryonic form with groups struggling to articulate in a formal way what they have encountered in the divine–human relationship. Anything that holds the status of a doctrine in a belief system or faith community is considered to have primary authority, whether written or unwritten. The degree to which people disagree with any doctrine can result in ecclesial reactions ranging from disagreement to schism to heresy.[4]

There are several contemporary definitions of doctrine that can prove useful to the principal-festival preacher. One Protestant theologian, William J. Carl III, points to its foundation, a base in Scripture. He asserts that the doctrines of the Bible mean "all Christian preaching is doctrinal."[5] Reformed theologian John Leith sees proclamation of doctrine as faithfulness to Christian history and tradition: "The primary purpose of theology is always first to explicate in understandable language the deposit of faith that has been the tradition of the church."[6] Homiletician Charles L. Campbell assesses two other theologians who have struggled with the definition of doctrine: "For [Hans] Frei, as for [George] Lindbeck, Christian doctrines . . . are not primarily expressions of experience or statements of timeless propositional truth, but rather 'communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.'"[7]

Roman Catholic theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson views the nature of Christian belief in a dynamic fashion, based on three interactive realities that create it: the mysteries of God, the searching nature of the human spirit, and changes historically created by human culture. While not using the word *doctrine*, she names the dynamic heart of doctrinal creation by noting how these factors require "that there be an ongoing history of the quest for the living God that can never be concluded."[8] Johnson's words mean, therefore, that proclaiming the doctrines of the principal festivals is not simply repeating history but entering as well into the present realities of God. Doctrine becomes a journey down a spacious, open avenue, not a closed book.

By way of festival example, Reginald Fuller's comments on the kind of preaching he hopes for Christmas illustrates this demanding and radically appropriate *doctrinal a*genda.

> The Christmas festival is not primarily a historical commemoration of the birth at Bethlehem but the celebration of God's

> eschatological self-disclosure in the Christ-event. The commercialization and sentimentalization of Christmas in the secular world, and their effects on the Church, make it advisable to deemphasize the historical aspect of Christmas and to stress its theological aspect.[9]

Developments in twentieth-century proclamation have influenced the way doctrine is or is not proclaimed. These homiletical trends offer the preacher the greatest challenge of all: to speak *both* biblically and doctrinally in terms of these festivals. Unfortunately, most festival preaching starts and stops with the biblical record, never bringing it into any kind of doctrinal connectivity with contemporary hearts and lives.

The impact of the last several decades of so-called narrative preaching, usually defined as "storytelling," a mode of sermonic construction, has been particularly troublesome in this regard. Doctrine and teachings often receive less attention in this more experientially slanted type of proclamation. It is a form of preaching that can be effective but is difficult to do well. Hermeneutical work is more heavily weighted toward what the pew sitter might make of the sermon than what the preacher proclaims.

This type of preaching frequently reflects lack of congregational attention to instruction in evangelism, the catechumenate, mission, and Christian education. At its worst, it becomes only a "feel-good" form of proclamation. Unfortunately, the impact of such preaching, with its own set of beguilements and assets, has been so widespread that one must ask what new models of proclamation are in process today that might offset its problems.

With the trend toward increasing secularization globally, simply "telling the story" is insufficient; bluntly speaking, it is not the whole story. One can well critique this approach with these questions.

- Whose story has not been heard?
- Is there a different way of hearing the story than in the way I am now being told it?
- Which characters are absent from this story's telling?
- What does this story *mean*?
- What has the church over time said about this story?

In seeking to redress this situation, Campbell implicitly draws attention to the need for a model of proclamation that will include appreciation and incorporation of the lively teachings of the church.

> Contemporary narrative homileticians [defined as narrative storytellers] have not given adequate attention to the larger context of preaching, particularly the community of faith within which preaching takes place. They have ignored the communal practices that are essential for a truthful hearing of the gospel. In their focus on discrete experiential Word-events, contemporary homileticians have neglected the intimate relationship between preaching, polity, and discipleship. They have overlooked not only the political nature of Christian preaching, but also the importance of a disciplined community for a "new hearing" of the Word.[10]

Campbell's assessment invites a larger look at preaching, including the incorporation of more teachings into the proclamatory act as a primary means of consciously moving the congregation from an aggregate of individuals to building up the community of faith. In this sense, the preaching of the principal festivals doctrinally offers excellent opportunities to take seriously Campbell's challenge.

The preacher must be able to bring the text hermeneutically into dialogue with a given community's celebration. To do so is to encourage mature growth in the Christian faith. Such proclamation, doctrinally grounded, can encourage listeners to engage the difficult issues of public discipleship and political realities rather than being content with inane, listener-friendly versions of the biblical texts or forms of response that are only self-justifying ethical quietism. Doctrinal festival preaching invites listeners to enact in daily living these expressions of faith that are the mysterious, core sources of action and salvation. Doctrinal preaching invites choice and action, not simply aesthetic appreciation.

Obviously, biblical texts are not doctrinal handbooks. And in fact, sermons should not be either! Preaching on Holy Trinity Sunday, for example, is based on biblical texts that focus on scattered efforts to verbalize differing aspects of humanity's primary experiences of God. The word *Trinity* does not appear in the Bible, and trinitarian articulations were developed formally only centuries after the biblical texts were composed. There are, however, additional homiletical reinforcements that support doctrinal proclamation for the festivals.

The clue lies partly in those verbal and nonverbal cues within the worship environment that support and point to the biblical texts and the preacher's words. Parishioners in liturgical traditions are surrounded with many "prompts" that reinforce doctrinal proclamation

on the principal festivals. They hear doctrinal phrases and materials repeated in the creeds, liturgies, and sacramental actions of their traditions. Paraments, stained-glass windows, and other liturgical artifacts and symbols surround and "second" these verbal experiences of worshipers and the work of the preacher as well.

Perhaps most importantly, within the context of all the church's doctrinal witness, the preacher is called to a *personal* commitment to doctrinal preaching, embracing rather than avoiding its enormous possibilities for forming the spiritual life of a congregation from the pulpit. This obviously calls for more dedicated study time spent with the history and doctrinal life of the church. If N. T. Wright's invitation to celebrate our festivals more widely and deeply (see the introduction, above) is to be effected, the preacher can enthusiastically elicit the intellectual, volitional, and emotional attention of parishioners with the hopes that through the sermon, worship, and parish and personal life, they might personally appropriate doctrine as a source of life and salvation.

Above all, preaching the festivals doctrinally is truly the source of our joy as believers! In one of Chrysostom's homilies on 1 Corinthians, in speaking of Passover, he encourages his parishioners to adapt a lifelong festival approach:

> It is festival, therefore, the whole time in which we live. For though he [Paul] said, "Let us keep the feast," not with a view to the presence of the Passover or of Pentecost, did he say it; but as pointing out that the whole of time is a festival unto Christians, the cause of the excellency of the good things which have been given. For what hath not come to pass that is good? The Son of God was made man for thee; He freed thee from death; and called thee to a kingdom. Thou therefore who hast obtained and art obtaining such things, how can it be less than thy duty to "keep the feast" all thy life?[11]