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Exegesis and Preaching

Sermons originate from a variety of sources. That spark of inspiration, that “connection” between events experienced or words spoken and the Word of God are often the grist for the homiletic mill. The mind begins to churn. A particular passage or overarching theological truth grounded in the “whole counsel of God” presents itself. And another sermon is born. Or is it? How do we know if what we are saying is what “Thus saith the Lord”, what we want the Lord to be saying or what we were always told the Lord meant? How do we go about getting a “fresh” Word, whether it is every week or on special occasions? I suggest some “prayerful exegesis.”

Prayer is the bedrock of the ministry enterprise. The Gospel writer Mark notes that when Jesus chose the twelve disciples, he chose them first “to be with him”, *then* “to be sent out to preach.”¹ In other words, there is no preaching without the discipline of prayer. A preacher must know first how to “be with” the Lord before s/he tries to proclaim the Lord. Gardner C. Taylor, while acknowledging the many factors that affect preaching notes, “preaching depends so much on the spiritual state of the preacher.”²

Ministry in general and preaching in particular is most effective when done out of the “overflow.” As preachers, it is important that we give out the abundance of what God has already poured into our lives. We must first be sated through communion with the Lord so that we have something to give to others. When the preacher ministers out of the abundance of his or her walk with the Lord, both pulpit and pew can leave the preaching moment full.

A strong prayer life teaches us the voice of God and helps us to perceive and interpret the movement of God’s Spirit in our lives. Prayer helps us to discern the difference between a word for us and a word for the people. Sometimes God must speak *to* the preacher

¹ Mark 3: 14-15

² Gardner C. Taylor, “Foreword” in *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority* by Samuel D. Proctor (Valley Ford: Judson Press, 1994) ix.

before God can speak *through* the preacher. The preacher must be in a position to hear a word for and about him/herself lest we preach our stuff onto someone else. One of the many dangers of “going on empty” is that during a personal famine, one may give *any* word, even the wrong word, because one is grateful just to have something (anything) to say.

Just as prayer is essential for preaching, so also is the Bible. Prayer and the study of God’s Word are interconnected. It is never enough to simply know the Bible; one must know the God of the Bible. Dr. Proctor wrote, “Knowing the Bible is great and necessary, but knowing the God about whom the Book speaks and the Christ who is the center is the ultimate objective.”³ The study of scripture, mixed with prayer, enables one to know not only the letter but also the spirit of the Word. Out of this crucible of prayer and preparation, supplication and study, a sermon is crafted. Therefore, Proctor defined a sermon as the “proclamation of the truth of God, through Jesus Christ, by a preacher endowed with spiritual discipline.”⁴

Sermon and scripture may interact in a variety of ways. A person may preach *from* a particular scripture or passage. In this way, the scriptures are foundational to the sermon. Their presence is obvious and stated from beginning to end. One may also preach *to* the scriptures. One’s message may lead up to the scriptures, using the scripture as the central thought. Certain passages preach themselves. Narratives may be ready made sermons looking for a preacher who can “tell the story.” In this type of sermon, one is preaching *through* the scriptures. Then there are some sermons in which one does not rely on a particular passage or verse. A specific scripture may not be quoted, but the sermon is developed *around* the scriptures. In other words, the sermon may be more thematic, using as its basis some theological truth found in the Word of God but not grounded in one particular passage.⁵ Regardless of how the sermon and scripture interact, there is no sermon apart from the scriptures. A sermon is proclamation that is “informed by the Scriptures.”⁶ Thus, the scriptures must be properly interpreted or our sermons will be *misinformed*.

To properly interpret the scriptures is to engage in the activity of exegesis. Exegesis comes from the Greek verb *exēgeomai*, which means, “to lead out.”⁷ When one exegetes a text, one seeks to provide an “explanation” or “interpretation” of what has been written.⁸ One seeks to “lead out” the meaning of the text so that one can offer an

³ Samuel D. Proctor, The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority by Samuel D. Proctor (Valley Ford: Judson Press, 1994) 5.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ William D. Watley, “Sir We Wish to See Jesus: The Text”, lecture given on June 2, 2001 at St. James AME Church, Newark, New Jersey for the Ministerial Staff Training Session.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lidell and Scott, An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, Seventh Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 274.

⁸ Exegesis is the noun form of *exēgeomai*, which means “explanation, interpretation”. Ibid.,

explanation or interpretation of it. Exegesis, then, is a “systematic way of interpreting a text” with the goal of “reach[ing] an informed understanding of the text.”⁹

Exegesis is meant to happen *before* the writing of the sermon. Exegesis is the explanation before the proclamation. During this phase of preparation, one seeks to understand what the passage or verse means. Once the preacher understands what the text is saying, s/he can move to answer the questions of application, “How can one apply what has been discovered?” and relevancy, “So what? What is the point of all of this?”

⁹ John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner’s Handbook, Revised Edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987) 23.

