

The Future of Evangelical Homiletics

Steven W. Smith

I believe in homiletics. But not much. A thousand sorrows teaches a man to preach.¹

- John Piper

In a very real way I agree with John Piper. There is no pedagogical homiletic experience that can create a man that has been so long on the anvil of God that his life bleeds the truth he is teaching. I really do believe that. Yet while I agree in spirit, I fear that some today understand these two as exclusive of one another, i.e.: “Go to God’s school and don’t worry about training in preaching.” Yet, this assumes so much.

This way of thinking assumes the would-be preacher understands the nature of Scripture, the ecclesiastical mandate for the preacher to explain it, and has some sense of the power of the Word of God; that the Word should not be tampered with by adding the alloy of our own opinion. This also assumes the preacher has some sort of natural giftedness, that the preacher is interesting. However, if the preacher *does not* understand a theology of preaching, the nature of the function of the Word in the life of a believer within the local church, the subsequent mandate to explain the Scripture to people, or natural giftedness, then that preacher benefits greatly from formal instruction. And what a thrill to experience the quality of students that God stewards to our care!

This is why I am absolutely (sort) of optimistic about the future of evangelical homiletics.

The optimism for the future of preaching does not come from the evangelical landscape, but the classroom. More than ever, I experience students who deeply want to know God through His Word. And this, of course, is the end game. Preaching trends with their respective emphases will come and go. However, if we have students who fall in love with the words of the Word, I have confidence they will spend the rest of their lives trying to work out of them what God works in them. And we do have such students. Students increasingly are disengaged with preaching cloaked in the pretense of formality, or preaching that, in a crass overreach for “authenticity”, is itself pretentious. No, this group simply wants to be faithful to explain Scripture and let God take care of the rest. This is a very encouraging trend. Sort of.

The governor of my optimism is first the reality that, if national trends continue, in the future we will have fewer students to influence. The reason our students have this desire to preach well is because they blocked a few years off to think about theology, to wrestle with biblical studies, and grapple with the nuances of biblical interpretation. This process of mental

¹ Piper, John (JohnPiper). “I believe in homiletics. But not much. A thousand sorrows teaches a man to preach.” 19 June 2014, 7:01 a.m. Tweet.

gestation took place in a campus laboratory where so many other students were trying to do the same thing. This is theological incubation: an intentional desire to colonize around the life of the mind, so that that the life of ministry would be deeper, richer, and in the end more impactful.

Yet those who choose to be intellectual colonialist before they are ministerial pioneers are fewer and fewer between. All leading indicators show that online courses will be growing and residency programs decreasing. There are some positive things about this; after all, the distance format reaches those who did not have access to theological education before this time. For this reason, I'm pro-distance education and, prayerfully, not an academic elitist curmudgeon. Yet, what I want to do with this person cannot ultimately be done by distance. There is too much to be caught that is nuanced by incarnational pedagogy. Like for example, the love for the Word that makes one want to explain it.

Another reality that tempers my optimism is that there are fewer preachers who will simply explain the text. There are several reasons. The first reason is timeless: while attempting to place the text of Scripture in local context, there has always been deference for practical application. This is the necessary mandate of all preaching. However, preaching that is application-driven alone can descend unchecked into the purely pragmatic; an exposition of our culture and not the text. Proverbial opinion rolled into armchair psychology. This preaching trend is not new, but it currently expresses itself in a very specific way.

For want of a robust theology of preaching, the methodology of expository preaching is often conflated with a *style* of preaching. Be it the three point preacher all suited up, or the slick seeker-seeking PowerPointing alliterator, to the younger preacher: it's just all so 2005. Preachers under 35 generally confuse exposition with a style; one that is unattractive and dated. Sadly, while they understandably jettison this style, they also leave the philosophy behind it. This is why the most important homiletics class, or part of a class, is a theology of preaching where we explain the theology behind the philosophy. Our theology of preaching transcends style. If we do not understand the way in which God communicates, we will never know how to communicate ourselves. Which is another point altogether.

The final tamper to my optimism is the reality that the nature of Scripture will be increasingly redefined. While some might disagree with this prediction, and I pray I am wrong, I'm convinced that future generations will further redefine the evangelical understanding of the nature of Scripture. Some might even see this as a positive sign. However, I'm convinced when Scripture is perceived as something less than the very Word of God, representing the perfect nature of God, the impetus to do the difficult work of understanding and explaining it will be lost. Inerrancy anticipates exposition.

So this is my optimism: very bright students desiring to be faithful and effective. This is my pessimism: a world where Scripture is devalued, exposition is seen merely as a stylistic relic, while distance education rubs out the need for residential theological training.

However, it is exactly in these moments when we need fewer prophets and more historians. Historically, God rights His people; our propensity to err is not greater than His providence. So we wait in His care while we fight for the authority of Scripture and the necessary clarity needed for its proclamation. May He give us grace.