

Final Essay | PR 610
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When considering why one should preach, it is of course of utmost importance to consider the nature and character of God. Without him, the preaching event becomes at best a pep-talk, and at its worst a public address with a manipulative agenda. So who is this awesome being, and how do I portray his character to those with whom I am communicating? Moreover, who am I that he should choose me to convey this message of salvation and sanctification to his people?

I have thought this through most earnestly, questioning my own sanity and even the Lord's discerning process in his selection of servant-proclaimers. I can only conclude that my situation is scriptural, because throughout the biblical narrative Yahweh has chosen seemingly obscure and clearly unworthy people to be his messengers. I believe that he chooses broken vessels so others will see a reflection of their own humanity, and in our striving towards holiness they might catch a glimpse of the divine.

In light of the personhood and nature of God, why then should I preach? First of all, he has commanded it. Secondly, it should be a natural outflow of gratitude from a thankful heart. Thirdly, in keeping with our Wesleyan tradition, I believe that preaching can make a difference. On a related topic, this is something that always confused me about Calvinism. If one truly believes the doctrine of double predestination, Calvinistic evangelism is nothing more than the spiritual equivalent of panning for gold. Since no amount of preaching can change the final outcome, the main purpose of any type of outreach is to simply separate the diamonds from the rough, so to speak.

Not so with our tradition. I believe that by presenting the gospel in the purest possible light, hearts can be changed and lives transformed. This is not to say that I deserve any credit, save being obedient to God, for it is the Holy Spirit that quickens my

words and makes their ears receptive. It is a strange paradox, and one that I will never fully know, the reason that this self-sustaining perfect God chooses finite beings to carry his message. How privileged, honored and humbled must those be who are chosen to preach the word of God.

I am thankful for this past semester, and that I am able to come to a place of such a rich heritage, to learn more about how the church is to coexist with the world. I have come away with a few key principles that have been reinforced through seminary class readings and through various speakers I have heard throughout the term. *Preaching from the Soul* has without a doubt been the best book we have read for this class. Kalas emphasizes the point that all preaching should be incarnational. In other words, there is no set formula for success, and what worked last time may fail miserably the next. The only absolute which cannot be successfully altered in sermon preparation is reliance on the Holy Spirit. Other than that, the rest is flexible. Much like the jazz topic which was discussed in the first few days of class, as musicians of the word we have learned the text and theory, now it is time to play to the rhythm of grace.

One thing that I have noticed is that Seth has caught a bit of flak in class for being dressed-down when he preaches. And yet in hearing him preach, one would surmise that he is university/seminary trained. It is not that he is unaware of the rules or has no theology of attire. Rather, in having learned these principles both in class and life experience, he chooses to defy them because that defines him. To me, this comes across not as outright rebellion, but as improv: jazz. As far as being post-modern, I would say that Seth is right on the money. While the seminary stresses as a priority reaching out to the post-modern world, many of us and myself included, are still adhering to a modern

mindset. I would attribute more credibility to the well-dressed businessman than to say, a prophet crying out in the wilderness, asking instead, “Man, what’s up with the camel hair and locusts?”

This semester, I was able to attend the Ivy Jungle: Campus Ministry Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. What I thought would be an easy pass-fail two credit class turned out to be quite a life-impacting experience. I was able to hear many eye-opening Christian speakers, including Brian McLaren. While homiletics is arguably not his strong point, he did have some very challenging things to say. I think his gritty way of dealing with church issues stems perhaps from the fact that he is not seminary, but university trained. At any rate, I appreciated his fresh perspective.

He brought pictures of a turtle, which had swum through a plastic ring, such as one would find on a milk carton or Gatorade bottle. However unlikely, it had lodged itself perfectly around the turtle’s shell. Oblivious to this foreign object, the turtle had continued to grow. The growth process simply allowed for the impediment, expanding around it. The result was an hourglass-shaped turtle, pinched in the middle by this plastic ring. Though deformed, it was still fertile and laid eggs which hatched normally. Those who found the turtle cut off the plastic ring, which though it had no immediate effect, allowed for future growth. Had it not been removed, the turtle would have died if it continued to grow. McLaren likened this to how the church as a whole is today. It is still alive and even bearing offspring, but if it is not eventually freed from its modern confines it will grow too large to sustain itself.

He also showed us a picture of a particularly well-designed bridge in Honduras. After intense flooding, the river the bridge once crossed jumped its banks. It now no

longer flows beneath the bridge, but is located several hundred yards parallel to its old channel. Again, he used this as an illustration of how he sees the church today. It is sturdily built, able to withstand even the greatest of floods, and yet no longer serves its intended purpose. Instead, it is a monument to its own irrelevance. McLaren later said, “If the 1950’s ever come back, we’re ready!” While arguably overstated, he did make some interesting points and raised dialogue about what we can do to reach an increasingly post-modern generation.

I think that people are often offended by McLaren because of his apparent disregard for church tradition and liturgy. While I think that it is important to have knowledge of these things, I also believe he is on the right track. What he is doing is not necessarily opposing such ideals. Instead, he is proposing that we cut away some of the liturgical landscaping we have done, and get back to the solid foundation of the Bible. What people today find irrelevant is not the Word of God, but the wrapping into which we have so neatly packaged it.

In my other readings this semester, I was surprised to find just how avant-garde Arminius and Wesley were in their thinking. And yet, we remember them not because they were so forward-thinking, but because they called the church to get back to its roots, back to the basic truths of the Bible. Arminius was persecuted because he took such a strong stance against double predestination. He was told to recant the Bible as final authority, and instead recite the five points of Calvinism. Wesley took things a step further than Arminius, emphasizing the doctrine of individual and social holiness and the very real possibility of being perfected in love during this lifetime. Both of them took a

tremendous amount of flak for their beliefs, which flew in the face of a church which had long since forgotten its purpose.

To me, McLaren is doing nothing worse than the early fathers of our holiness tradition. He said during one seminar that the church needs to be much more than a warehouse, storing up souls and protecting them from damage, spoilage and theft until we can deliver them safely to heaven. He said that the church should be emphasizing Christianity as a life-transforming endeavor which is no safer than it is boring. To me, this sounds more like the church of Acts, living in a dangerous and exciting world in which they relied on God for their protection and provision. Wesley was criticized for giving open-air sermons, to which he replied, "The world is my parish."

If I am to be a preacher, let me be in the same vein as these who were initially labeled rebels. If not, then I would rather take a secular job, so that I can be financially independent of the system I am trying to reform. I want to see the United Methodist Church united. The schisms and divisions within the church are not Wesleyan and are most certainly not biblical. In the words of Dr. Rick Grey, "Jesus came preaching the kingdom, but the church came."

I fear though, that like a deadly cancer, the infestation may already be too great, and the window of opportunity for resolution long since closed. Either way, I think it is time for institutions such as Asbury to go on the offensive against the encroachments of darkness. In a day and age where the term "United Methodist seminary" is synonymous with liberal theology, Asburians will be desperately needed to preach scriptural holiness from both the pulpit and the marketplace.

I recently had a conversation with my second cousin about the topic of homosexuality in the church. My wife and I were guests in her home during Thanksgiving, and were catching up with these relatives I had not seen since the age of twelve. The topic came up naturally, in table conversation about our graduate studies. I told her that I was considering another masters in communication, and an eventual secular or para-church job, in order to not be at the whim of the denomination. She asked what I found to be wrong with the denomination, and I told her that I saw moral laxity on the topic of homosexuality to be one of the bigger problems. She then asked if the church should not keep up with the changing culture.

I told her that yes, the church should be adaptive to the point that it helps further the Biblical message, but in areas in which the message itself is at risk of compromise, the church should stand steadfast and absolute in a world of confusion. She cited medial evidence that homosexuality is a genetic predisposition. I told her that alcoholism is as well, but that does not mean that the Bible condones either. Regarding the topic of relationships, the only common ground I could find that we agreed on was monogamy. Her daughter currently has a live-in boyfriend at college, a relationship which is fully condoned by the extended family.

We eventually concluded the conversation due to time constraints, agreeing to disagree. It broke my heart that this woman, a well-educated healthcare professional, and sincerely seeking Christian, did not know the Biblical stance on homosexuality. It is especially sad that despite Paul being so clear on the matter, she had heard *from the pulpit* that homosexuality is not in fact sin, because the Bible is antiquated on this topic. I told

her that if the Bible contains truth at all, it must be timeless truth. If not, we should all find ourselves another religion and quit wasting our time.

Despite not having a formal preaching ministry as of yet, I would say that in this way, my theology of preaching intersects my life. During the conversation, I found myself taking into account the context of the audience, so to speak. I allowed her to put forth her medical assertions, and responding to her without discrediting her knowledge of the topic. I then approached the issue coming from the background with which I am familiar, though she does not consider the Bible authoritative. While no conclusive point was reached neither was I shunned, and received an open invitation to visit again anytime.

I feel that therein lies one of the bigger temptations in preaching, that of watering down the gospel in order to have the congregation like you. Despite their sincerity of faith, when you really get down to it, people do not want to be convicted of sin, and any pastor that will add a blessing to their current lifestyles will be welcomed more readily. Granted, there are congregations amongst our denomination that would not stand for any theological or doctrinal compromise. Unfortunately, such congregations are on the decline and may eventually be the exception, not the norm.

After seminary, I hope that I will be integral in building up the kingdom of God, whether that be from within the church as a pastor, or from the sidelines as one of the laity. Regardless, I know that what I have learned in this class will be put to good use. Ideally, I will be accepted into the process of United Methodist ordination, and hopefully will be an effective preacher if they will have me. Yet, if a reformer is not what they are looking for in the pulpit, then I will be contented to fulfill the role of my namesake, engaging in dialogue with those in power and saying, "Thou art the man."

References:

While not directly cited, these readings have influenced my theology of preaching this past semester. I feel that I can list them with integrity, and not be accused of padding the list of bibliographical references:

- Campolo & McLaren. Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel.
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