



Christian Preaching: An Introduction (4)

Sermon Delivery

In this final session we are going to focus upon 'sermon delivery'. A 'sermon' to become 'preaching' has to be delivered. This delivery still involves attention to the 'content' and the 'shaping' of the 'sermon script' as well as to a number of physical considerations which are important as the prepared 'sermon' becomes an embodied, spoken and heard event.

Designing and Delivering Rhetorically

Preaching requires 'rhetoric'. Rhetoric is simply the persuasive use of speech. It does not have to mean something showy or false. Rather, if speaking publicly, and indeed preaching is to be persuasive some attention does need to be given to what makes public speaking persuasive.

Historically attention is drawn to three features of public speaking that are required to make it persuasive. These three features are indicated by Greek terms:

Logos – is an appeal to others on the basis of good content. For preaching this means reasonable and logical interpretations and arguments based upon the Scripture text from which you are preaching. If you make careless, undeveloped, inconsistent claims as to what a Scripture text meant or means you will not be convincing as you preach. One of the weaknesses in 'poor' preaching is quite simply the quality of the content.

Pathos – is an appeal to the emotions. People have hearts as well as heads. They are more than 'brains on sticks' as the writer J. K. A. Smith has said. Scripture indeed requires a holistic response from people which involves the heart as well as the mind. Indeed, the greatest command is one to 'love' - 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbor as yourself.' (Luke 10:27)

Ethos – is an ethical appeal based upon the character of the speaker. To be sure this relates to the wider knowledge and consistency of life you are known to have. It can, however, mean more than that. It relates to 'how you come across' during the event of preaching. If you come across as caring, authentic, honest, likeable, you will be much more persuasive than if you come across as arrogant. Humour can attract people but also offend if it is disparaging about others not least minority groups. This has nothing to do with the offence of the gospel but the offence of the preacher. Ethos is about coming across as a persuasive 'character', trustworthy and honest, as you preach.

Activity:

Think of a sermon you recently preached or heard preached or are about to preach. To what extent can you see the 'appeal' to logos, pathos, and ethos, in content and delivery.

Illustration and Story

One of the ways in which the Scriptural content you have prepared can be designed and delivered persuasively towards your sermon purpose (recap previous sessions) is through the use of illustration and story. Although an illustration can be a story and a story an illustration they are not exactly the same and I will distinguish between them here for clarity.

Illustration and 'logos'

Illustrations are examples, other ways of explaining something, and as such can add to the rational and logical (logos) persuasiveness of what you are saying. Illustrations give people examples of something they know in order to help them grasp ideas or concepts with which they are less familiar. Think of the ways in which people try and 'illustrate' the 'Trinity'. Illustrations reiterate and reinforce ideas, arguments, and content. Illustrations can be drawn from many sources and areas of life and some preachers gather illustration from their own life, or from books, or from newspapers, films, music etc. Of course, there are books of 'sermon illustrations' and resources online and these can be helpful although do not always come across as authentic as the ones you have discovered yourself from your own life.

Stories and 'pathos'

Stories involve the retelling of events relating to usually human characters living out their lives. They bring in a 'human', flesh and blood, point of contact between the content you are seeking to communicate and your listeners. They can do more than simply illustrate truth but also communicate truth through the story. Stories normally move from some point of difficulty to the way in which that difficulty is resolved for good or bad. When and where people can identify with the characters in stories they are drawn into what happens not simply at the level of mind but at the level of heart (pathos). Some preachers are natural story tellers able to see things in life that they can tell. Others, have to rely on the stories told by others and collect them like they do illustrations.

Illustrations/Stories and Ethos

Illustrations and stories can be powerful. They can enhance the persuasive appeal of the preacher and in turn the preacher's character: but a few 'rules' need to be observed or the 'exact' opposite is true:

- a) **Be accurate in your illustrations.** If you take an illustration from an area of life in which you are not personally 'knowledgeable', e.g. medicine, try and make sure that it is accurate. Do your research. As you are saying – 'it is like this', you do not want people sitting in the congregation knowing that it is not! This harms your trustworthiness. You do not need to know every detail of sword fencing to use it as an illustration, (I have) but you need to know enough and can begin by saying: 'I am, no expert in sword fencing, but I like to think about it like this...'

- b) **Be honest with your stories.** Do not claim that a story actually happened if it did not or give the impression that it happened to you if it did not. This does not mean that you cannot tell such stories, rather you simply introduce them by saying such things as 'There is a story told, maybe just a story but...' or 'Fred Craddock (or whoever) tells the great story...' or, 'I heard a story in a recent sermon...' and on you go. Such phrases show your integrity to listeners.
- c) **Be careful.** Be careful not to tell personally sensitive stories about people without their permission. Telling a sensitive story and beginning it by saying, "I asked if I could tell this..." enhances rather than diminishes your trustworthiness to listeners. If you are going to anonymise people to tell a sensitive story, make sure that people CANNOT work out who you are talking about. Also, be careful to have a balance in the stories you tell in terms of their nature and the diversity of people who appear in them.

Activity:

Think of a sermon you recently preached or heard preached. Look for the stories and illustrations used. Did they on balance offer an appeal to the head and to the heart in a persuasive way? Can you see any ways in which they might have been unhelpful and thus harmed the persuasiveness of the preacher?

Using Your Sermon Script

Most people have some form of written 'script' for their sermon, if only notes. Some things are worth noting and practicing with here:

- a) Your sermon script should not become a distraction whether it is on pieces of paper or an electronic device. At best any changes of pages should be seen by you and not by your listeners.
- b) Your notes in their final form should be written to be 'spoken by the mouth' and 'heard by the ear' not read by the eye and comprehended silently in the mind. Your final script should be written the way you are going to speak the sermon more like the script for a play than for a novel.
- c) You should rehearse your written sermon out loud before you ever preach it in a congregation – hearing what it sounds like and changing your notes so that when you speak from them they can be 'spoken well'. Remember the written sermon is not the preaching – the embodied delivery by mouth to ear is the sermon so spend time in preparing a sermon that can be spoken well.
- d) Do not be afraid to put 'notes' to yourself on your sermon script, e.g. 'slow down', 'read this bit with care', 'do not digress here'.
- e) You should have a clear knowledge from your sermon notes as to how long your sermon will last. There is simply no need for preaching that goes beyond the allocated time.

Activity:

Get the sermon script of a sermon you have preached or are going to preach. Read it from the paper out loud. See if you can adapt it on the paper so that it reads better for the 'ear' to be spoken than for the 'eye' to be silently read.

Voice and Eye Contact

Here two basic 'rules' on which you should get feedback from others.

1. **Can you be heard.** This involves asking whether all of what you say can be heard. Speaking too fast, mumbling, or dropping one's voice at the end of sentences are three habits of preachers that can have a hugely negative impact on the quality of their delivery. The goal is to be heard without shouting in a way that allows you to raise and drop your volume for emphasis but still being heard. A PA system will amplify but you need to work with that given volume in a controlled manner.
2. **Keep eye contact with the congregation.** You should scan the room trying to slowly take in everyone but not resting too long on anyone to make them feel uncomfortable. Do not spend the sermon staring at your notes or the ceiling or into the air.

Activity:

The next time you preach ask someone to give you feedback on these two areas.

Final note: - review your own preaching on audio or video regularly in the light of the matters covered in these sessions. This can be time consuming and at perhaps 'painful' but it can greatly enhance your preaching if you learn from this.

Please note: These notes were prepared by Dr. Stuart Blythe Associate Professor in the John Gladstone Chair of Preaching and Worship, Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, for the SBLPA. These are for the personal use of SBLPA members and should not be reproduced or distributed without permission.