

The Role of the Personality of the Preacher in Preaching

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ABSTRACT

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In this article preaching and the personality of the preacher are considered as being dialectically related to one other. Preaching, particularly, is the act of the preacher that makes the words meaningful. It seems that congregations often seem closer to the preacher than to the gospel. The real danger for the preacher is not the gospel, but his/her personality. Good preaching comes from a good personality.

1 INTRODUCTION

The expression “an average day” in the life of a preacher reflects a faulty mentality. Preachers face a full schedule of responsibilities. They have many meetings and many problems which need to be attended to. In these situations the preacher’s personality is involved in every aspect of life and the ministry. Modern day congregations are motivated by a preacher - not only because of his preaching, but also because of the personality of the preacher. The personality also refers to the preaching process taking place within the homiletical area. The sermon is mediated through the personality of the preacher. And the perspective of the sermon is reflected in the preacher’s life: the different components of the preacher’s personality thus cannot be ignored. Sometimes the preacher will face personal² dimensions of issues in his congregation, namely issues such as sex, integrity³, and economic justice.

1 This article is taken from a thesis which was submitted at the Faculty of Theology (University of Pretoria) under the supervision of Prof. C J A Vos.

2 The notion of a person is narrower than the wider notion of being an ‘individual’ (Peters 1967:210).

3 According to Swears (2000:37) the Christian pastor is called to be a person of integrity who must be trustworthy in daily life. Such a person is one in whom there is clear and evident harmony between word and deed. In other words, such a person is a person of integrity: from the Latin integer,

2 THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONALITY IN PREACHING

Preaching is truth mediated through personality (Brooks 1904:8; Broadus 1979:13; Killinger 1996:199; Motyer 1997:217; Windsor 1997:225). A person's certainties, his clearly defined value system, are rooted in what God has given him (Nel 2002:123). The person of the preacher is a vital element in effective preaching, because it is based on two general observations. One is that the minister works within an unusual network of trust and intimacy that makes the separation of character from performance impossible. The second is that all preaching is to some extent self-disclosure by the preacher. It is simply a truth about communication (Craddock 1985:22-23). Preaching feeds the "cult of personality". Preachers globalise their own experience and identify the hearer's personality with their own (McClure 1995:21). Therefore, as several theorists have noted, the personality in preaching is a powerful element⁴ of the preacher. But it is more often an implicative force in preaching, which is usually defined as any learning activity that lies outside the field of the pulpit. It encompasses a preacher's personality and life. This is one of the prime elements in preaching. And more important than accessibility is genuine respect for the congregation. The preacher's personality represents the sole basic variable involved in the modification of the congregation's behaviour. Indeed, it is very significant in the preaching situation, because preaching is more preacher-dominated and preacher-centered. According to Swears (2000:44) effective proclamation of the gospel requires authentic personal witness, and in the sermon the preacher is that witness. The listener's experience of that witness comes through what

meaning "sound, whole, entire". And integrity for the preacher is perfection in all behaviour and movement towards maturity in Christ.

4 Brooks (1904:43-59) mentions the following elements of a preacher's power: 1) It is a personal uprightness and purity impressed upon the people listening; 2) It is the freedom from self-consciousness; 3) It is a genuine respect for the people to whom he preaches; 4) He enjoys his work; 5) It has a gravity. It has a delicate power of discrimination. It attracts all that it can help and it repels all that it could harm or be harmed by it. It admits the earnest and simple with a cordial welcome; 6) It is courage. It is the indispensable requisite of any true ministry.

can, in one sense, be understood as the preacher's presence as a sacramental presence. In the preaching context, the preacher is a concrete physical expression of the grace and blessing of God.

In relation to preaching, personality is the verifiable power of those persons functioning as preachers. Therefore, preacher and personality are inseparable. If the preacher is not believable, then neither the message, because the preaching involves a personal relationship between preacher and congregation. That is, in preaching, the whole personality of the preacher should be involved. It cannot exist in isolation.

3 THE CHARACTER OF PERSONALITY⁵

Most personality theories have been developed by psychologists:

Personality is the totality of all the physical, psychological and spiritual characteristics which determine the behaviour of an individual (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen 1989:8). The dynamic organisation within the individual that determines his characteristic behaviour and thought (Allport 1961:28). Personality is the organised system of behaviours, attitudes, and values that characterize the individual and account for his particular manner of functioning in the environment (Silverman 1974:443). Personality refers to the distinctive patterns of behaviour (including thoughts and emotions) that characterise each individual's adaption to the situations of his or her life (Mischel 1986:4).

As these examples imply, there can be different meanings for the term 'personality'. Nevertheless, a common theme runs through all definitions of personality: personality determines the patterns of behaviour with the accompanying values and attitudes.

5 The English word "person" derives from the Latin *persona*, which originally had the sense of a "mask". This *persona* thus came to mean both "a theatrical mask" and "a theatrical character" or "a role in a play" (McGrath 2001:269; Meyer, Moore & Viljoen 1989:6). Freud saw the personality as composed of three parts: The "id" consisting of irrational passions and instincts and oriented to pleasure, the "ego" encompassing rational and cognitive components of the personality and oriented to the world of reality, and the "superego" embodying societal values and attitudes and oriented to matters of right and wrong (Clouse 1993:78).

On the other hand, another insight of a Christian perspective is offered by Willimon & Lisher (1995:372), namely that personality refers to the configuration of human characteristics possessed or presented by an individual. And Miller (1997:97) illustrates four important personality facts:

1. Personality is one of the factors that determine effectiveness.
2. Personality traits are the primary factors church people evaluate when they first meet clergy and church staff.
3. Many church members continue to filter their judgments regarding every aspect of job performance through the lens of a leader's personality.
4. Personality traits that are effective in one kind of organisation or congregation - or at one point in its history

The New Testament emphasizes the self-discipline of the pastor: "Take heed to yourselves" was the admonition. Paul addressed the presbyters of the Ephesian church, and then added "and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Act. 20:28) (Stott 1982:265). Paul's personality⁶ becomes evident in his letters, especially 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians. A personal relationship with the communities is a continual priority for him. When he underwent a religious conversion from Judaism to being a follower of Jesus, this redirected his life and ministry. Paul's ministry is a reminder that the content of preaching cannot be separated from the character of the preacher. In an era when preaching cannot compete in the communication revolution, the essential quality of preaching is the authenticity of the preacher. Preachers who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their message remain a compelling argument for the gospel (Thompson 2001:146).

The preacher's primary responsibility is to guard his personal life with God. The practice of preaching cannot be separated from the person of the preacher, because preaching is a communication of truth by (wo)man to (wo)men. The human element is essential in it, and not merely accidental. It has two essential elements; truth, and personality (Brooks 1904:5). The

6 See Doohan (1984:29).

truth is in itself a fixed and stable element; the personality is a varying and growing element. In the union of the two we have the provision for the combination of identity with variety, of stability with growth (Brooks 1904:78). According to Knox (1957:59) the preacher is a person sharing some of his most intimate and profound experiences with other persons. His speech is directed to a hearing group and is out of personal experience and commitment.

Therefore preaching is not speech about religion; it is a religious person speaking. It is this personal character of preaching which makes the moral integrity of the preacher so important.

4 THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PERSONALITY IN PREACHING

I am sure that one great source of weakness on the pulpit is the lack of personality. Personality is valuable and real on the pulpit. In preaching, the preacher's personality is an example to the congregation, because the preacher's personality will have an impact on the congregation even though he or she, consciously or unconsciously, attempts to suppress it, or the effort of suppressing will itself have impact on them (Lischer 1995:372). Personality is the foundation for preaching controversial issues. Personality and the message must be intricately related. The subject matter in any preaching is mediated through the personality of the preacher. There needs to be a relationship of trust between preacher and congregation. For this reason Brooks (1904:8) was convinced that truth through personality is a method of God:

“Truth through personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and out through the pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him.”

A similar view is taken by Pieterse (1987:127): the preacher's personality naturally has a major influence on nonverbal dialogue during a sermon. He should therefore always preach in character, so to speak, in the sense that his personality must come across in his sermon.

5 THE ELEMENT OF PERSONALITY OF THE PREACHER

The personality of the preacher is a matter of some great importance in this regard. To a preacher, immorality⁷, self-ambition, conceit⁸, jealousy, pride, pretentiousness, sexual sin, resentment⁹, self-complacency, and possessions can twist and destroy the preaching¹⁰. These play a real part in preaching. There must be nothing less than abundant knowledge. This must be the continuing function of the pulpit. The moral problems which face preachers in particular are far from new. They are part of the human situation, produced by human sin. The preacher always has to face this. If a preacher fails to address moral problems, there can be no real persuasion, teaching or identification. And sexual sin is related to moral character, not marital status. It has the heinous power to destroy a career, a family, and a reputation, all in one blow¹¹. Today, the preacher must have a reputation of being sexually pure. The apostle Paul remained keenly aware of that fact, saying, "I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor 9:27). Therefore according to MacArthur (1995:90), if a preacher is married, he is devoted to his one wife, not scandalised by past mistresses, illegitimate children, or present adulteries. He loves and desires only one woman and has been faithful to her.

One of the occupational hazards confronting the preacher is pride. It is not an attractive thing to see a man having a love affair with himself in public, but it is a rather common fact. To all those

7 An immoral or impure preacher does not share in the Kingdom of Christ and God (cf Eph 5:3-20).

8 Conceit is evil because it overrates the man, disregards the gifts and blessings of God, ignores the contribution others have made, and it is hypocritical because it is bluff (Halverson 1965:122).

9 Resentment is a mean and important form of suppressed anger. It attacks some of us when we can't get our own way, when we feel that someone has done us an injury, or when other people criticize us (Symonds 1959:60).

10 These kinds of temptations are not confined to the man in a small and easy situation. They are common temptations for all preachers.

11 Blackaby (2001:237).

tempted with the Messianic complex, the words of Paul to the Corinthians are still worthy of consideration:

“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 Cor 1:26-29 NIV).

On the other hand, honesty, consciousness¹², integrity¹³, humility¹⁴, simplicity, and sincerity of a preacher will reach the congregation’s heart. Integrity for the preacher is not perfection in all behaviour but honesty about his behaviour and movement towards maturity in Christ (Swears 2000:38). Furthermore, for a preacher, humility is indispensable today. Without preaching, a necessary part of humility has been lost. For humility is absolutely essential to a preacher. MacArthur (1995:22-28) explains the key of humility. A humble man, with a proper view of God, will be confident in God’s power, committed to God’s truth, commissioned by God’s will, compelled by God’s knowledge, and consumed with God’s glory.

Stott (1961:45-48) suggests some of the essential ingredients of a preacher’s humility. First, we need the humility

12 For example, God not only teaches us to keep our minds chaste and pure from all lust, but forbids any obscenity of speech and outward wantonness (Calvin 1960:1183).

13 The Hebrew translation of integrity means “complete, innocent, or morally whole.” Those who enjoy an intimate fellowship with God have no hidden areas of shame in their lives (Swindoll 1991:10). Therefore, it is crucial for preaching and pulpit ministry. When the congregation knows that their preacher is a person of integrity, they want to listen to the sermon because of the opportunity to add change to their lives.

14 The word “humility” comes from the same root as the word “humus”, which is the rich, fertile soil that contains decaying matter. When the old nature dies in us, it yields a healthy combination with God’s Spirit. Humility is to the soul what fertilizer is to a garden (Nelson 2002:107).

to submit to the Word of God. That is, we must resist the temptation to avoid the unfashionable truths of Scripture and to ventilate our own more trendy opinions instead. Second, humility of mind is to be accompanied by humility of motive. Why do we preach? What do we hope to accomplish by our preaching? Third, the humility is dependence. Every preacher desires to be effective. And integrity is also a vital example for today's congregation. The Christian pastor is called to be a person of integrity who, in order to be believable and trustworthy in the pulpit, must first be believable and trustworthy, that is, worthy of trust, in daily life. Such a believable and trustworthy person is one in whom there is clear and evident harmony between word and deed. In other words, such a person is a person of integrity, from the Latin 'integer', meaning "sound, whole, entire." And sometimes, fatigue and nervous exhaustion becomes more and more prevalent among preachers, and they will frequently collapse or disintegrate. According to Massey (1998:49), the preacher's work should make the foundational calling evident, while the preacher's life should be an instance of experienced grace. This understanding is crucial for a proper pulpit ministry, because it lets our preaching be heard and trusted as an honest public response to God, on the one hand, and as an honest reaching out to our hearers, on the other hand.

Therefore without doubt, the preacher's character, one's affections, one's whole intellectual and moral being must be evident in preaching. And all the preacher's emotions and reactions are involved in preaching. Awe, fear, gratitude, and love may all be experienced, because an individual's emotional life is likewise formed basically within the context of his ministry environment. In this sense, a preacher's personality is very important in the preaching ministry.

Preaching reflects the real life of a preacher: his whole life and personality are revealed to the congregation. The life and person of the preacher should be reflected. Congregations begin to respond to preaching when they can identify with it, because when a preacher confronts ethical problems in his life, congregations identify with his situation. Therefore, a preacher's personality should not be ignored or denied. The pastor-preacher needs an understanding of human personality (Stratman 1983:13). A preacher's personality also has an influence on the

effectiveness of preaching. This is to be expected because of the importance of the preacher as a ‘model’ for his congregation’s behaviour. The principles at work here are those of imitation and identification¹⁵. Imitation and identification are complex terms, that include a great variety of characteristics - mental, emotional¹⁶, social, anatomical, behavioural, and those concerning intelligence¹⁷. The factor of intelligence in personality is the ability to appraise situations readily, to see their significance in the total setting of present and past experience and to get the clue as to the likely line of wise action (Teed 1935:127).

On this point, the sermon concerns the close relationship between the preacher’s concrete modes of behaviour and his personality. It is no accident when a preacher says “I” often, too often, or seldom, or if a preacher speaks legalistically or graphically. These visible and audible elements are all deeply rooted in the personality (Lischer 1987:81). According to Lischer, the preacher’s personality is the type of invisible¹⁸ and informal¹⁹ roots. That is, in every aspect of life the preacher is linked with invisible and informal elements in his preaching. Therefore the preacher has to develop his ability to inculcate good qualities. Cox (1985:263, 269) introduces four qualities as guidelines for the preacher’s goals and disciplines; caring, working, believing, and behaving:

The quality of caring. This is the word that Elton Trueblood suggests should translate *agape* in the New Testament, which is of course translated as “charity” or “love.” The preacher has to be a caring person.

15 The identification of the preacher must be preserved. The identification is often based on the worth and value of a preacher.

16 Preachers have feelings of emotion. They feel sad, happy, angry, disappointed and a whole host of other emotions.

17 According to Cox (1985:258), the preacher must be intelligent, of good character, and of goodwill toward the hearers. These are qualities that are to be expected of anyone who wants to be believed, trusted, and followed.

18 These are emotions: joy, anger, sadness, patience, forbearance, goodwill.

19 Informal in gesture, body and voice.

The quality of working. The preacher's problem is not lack of time; it is the inefficient use of the time available. Preachers must establish priorities. The "rent-paying" activities are of first importance.

The quality of believing. Like caring, this is a quality not entirely in the hand of the preacher.

The quality of behaving. The moral²⁰ and ethical life of preachers greatly determines how they are heard. If we live in a time of relaxed moral standards, we will be more tolerant of the behaviour of those among whom we live and work.

As far as the qualities mentioned above are concerned, the personality of a preacher bears an integral relationship to his preaching on the pulpit, because the Christian message has always been a communication for the congregation by the preacher, but the congregation has to assimilate it into the categories of their own perspectives. The above qualities may also be used to evaluate the personality of the preacher. Therefore, the personality of the preacher has not really gone out of fashion; it is just that so much more is demanded today. The preacher is not extraneous to the preaching, but becomes a witness to the Word proclaimed in his own life.

6 CONCLUSION

The preacher should have a good moral character. The position of preacher, then, is a lofty one in the community, with equally lofty expectations. As with all preachers, personality is the central element for preaching, because the personal characteristics of preachers are major factors in shaping the preaching, activities and achievements of the pulpit. Congregations like preachers who are kind, friendly, cheerful, patient, helpful, fair, have a sense of humility and show an understanding of the congregation's problems. The personality of the preacher is rooted in the whole context of his life with man and God. That is, it should involve the whole story of the preacher's life. The

20 Morality is not simply a matter of what we do, but it is also a matter of how we do it and what its results will be (Cook 1983:68). Therefore a preacher's image is still the fundamental dimension of the moral life: the tendency to act in word and attitude. Certain personality traits increase the effectiveness of preaching.

preacher should be deeply cognisant of God's authority, and of the absoluteness of Christ's truth.

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