

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF AMERICAN PLURALISM:
A RESPONSE TO DR. GERALD WRIGHT

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RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF AMERICAN PLURALISM

We have heard the challenges related to sharing and nurturing our Christian faith in the setting of American pluralism. What will we do to address them?

American society has become fragmented into segments in which almost every cultural group has taken hold of a set of truths that have become absolute and a collection of values that have become non-negotiable. People in America have become more inclined toward urbanization and have seemingly settled into postmodernism with all its changes from the cultural expressions of modernism. Feeling, point-of-view, and holism have replaced critical thinking, objectivity, and the fact-values dichotomy.

After having been engaged on the battlefield with our old opponent modernism, how will we who are Christians respond to the challenges of postmodern America characterized by cultural pluralism? Reflecting on the presentation of those challenges has prompted me to consider two broad responses that emanate from my perspective as a practicing homiletical theorist and a tinker in practical theology. First, homiletical theorists have begun to make a notable effort toward including consideration of a congregation's worldview in the conversation about contemporary preaching, but we have a long way to go. Second, practical theologians can take the baton passed to them by those who have called for contextualization of our Christian faith in the current American climate by offering at least one practical proposal. Perhaps these two responses will be of some value to those who are engaged in the present discussion.

Homiletical Theory

Gratitude must be expressed to the faithful cultural anthropologists and missiologists who have devoted themselves to helping ministers grasp the necessity of understanding culture through

worldview. In a way, they have picked the lock on this socio-theological closed door. To their happy surprise, though, they may have discovered upon entering the door that more than a few homileticians had already crawled through a window, pursuing the same goal but from a different perspective.

Although preaching theorists have not reflected the worldwide scope of the technical language of the missiologists, they have been grappling with the same basic issue: how can the saving and nurturing message of Jesus Christ be communicated in such a way that people in their culturally unique settings can hear, be moved by, and respond to it?

This question has been at the forefront of discussion among present-day mainline homileticians. Consider, for example, David Buttrick and his phenomenological approach to sermon preparation and delivery. He advocates preaching that depends on telling stories and using metaphors that transfer meaning from the biblical story. Central to his approach is an awareness that the preacher's goal is not just to have something come out of his mouth. It is to compel something to come out of the hearer's mind. Therefore, the preacher must see to it that stories and metaphors chosen are consistent with the congregation's point of view.¹

A new voice in the discussion is Lucy Rose. A preaching theorist, she recently published her appeal for preachers to perceive their work in the pulpit as an agent in communal ethos. In her appeal she advocated that the preacher should prepare sermons in which connectedness within and outside the congregation remains of paramount importance.² In her argument, she reflects the influence of Buttrick as well as other mainline homileticians who have moved in the direction of

¹David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 55-68.

²Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 122.

listener-centered messages devoted to identifying the sermons through language with the persons in the congregation and the community.

Some homileticians have directed their work toward the notion that preaching at its best is an effort at affirming local or congregational theology. In so doing, they have placed primary emphasis on becoming aware of what the people in the church believe and structuring sermons that become points of identification. The theology needed to be communicated, they insisted, in keeping with the frame of reference of the local congregation.

For example, Leonora Tisdale, a recognized New Homiletician, connected preaching to the task of doing local theology. In her opinion, such hearer-oriented preaching placed primary value "upon the ability of the hearer to understand the message in his or her own symbolic framework and to relate it to his or her own world."³ Again, emphasis has been placed on shaping the message with sensitivity to a particular and unique worldview.

The apparent strength of this kind of homiletical approach is obvious: the sermons connect. But what do they connect? Therein lies the approach's greatest weakness. The biblical message is distilled, rearranged, and revised to the point that it has no distinctive ring, no sound of authority to it. The point of view of the congregation becomes the only absolute in the sermon preparation and delivery process.

What have evangelical homileticians been doing in this area? You would think that we would be moving aggressively toward being more listener-centered, incorporating or distinctive commitment to Scripture into the changing landscape of postmodernism. But so far we have not quite enough. In large measure, our focus is still on content-centered sermons.

³Leonora Tisdale, "Preaching as Local Theology," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 17 (July 1996): 139.

A tendency among us is to continue to satisfy ourselves with rewriting books on how to construct a sermon in a more or less traditional way simply for its own sake. Such a statement may sound somewhat course: I do not intend to imply an indictment. However, I wish to call attention to the work yet to be done to help evangelical preachers communicate the changeless truths of God's Word in a way that is effective in the face of distinctive worldviews of variegated American cultural groups.

To be fair, some evangelical preaching theorists have made significant strides. For instance, Warren Wiersbe, a popular preacher and well-known author of books filled with expository preaching outlines, confessed the he "got weary of bringing skeletons into the pulpit and producing cadavers in the pews."⁴ He set out, then, to make a difference in contemporary preaching by focusing on the homiletical value of imagination and metaphor.⁵ For the first time in recent years, an evangelical preacher deemed that those two terms were not dirty words. Newly sanctioned, they have finally entered the evangelical conversation about preaching to postmodern people in pluralistic America.

The conversation also has included Southern Baptist communication theorist Calvin Miller, who has argued for returning the sermon to the marketplace. In his refreshing contribution he highlighted four paradigm shifts to be faced in contemporary preaching: a new consumerism, denominational decline, the worship-language barrier, and the perception of Christianity as merely an American subculture.⁶ While he did not address specifically the challenge of understanding

⁴Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination: A Quest for Biblical Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994), 9.

⁵Ibid., 19.

⁶Calvin Miller, *Marketplace Preaching: How to Return the Sermon to Where it Belongs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 24.

cultural worldview, he called for a change of direction, encouraging preachers not to ignore the need to be listener-centered as well as message-centered in their sermons.

Such clear warnings from these and other evangelical homileticians have sounded an alarm for preaching theorists to rethink the task before us if we intend to help preachers to engage the culture effectively in the next century. May their trip increase!

Our growing homiletical interest in imagination, metaphor, and story looks promising. If we could prompt preachers to be reflective and creative as they search for ways to build rhetorical bridges between the Scripture and the people who listen to their sermons, kingdom benefits would be reaped. Moreover, if we could continue to devote attention to locating and communicating in congregation-specific word pictures that translate meaning from the text to people, we will be taking a step toward greater effectiveness in the twenty-first-century pulpit. Likewise, as we move toward more effective use of story as a communicative tool, we will hand to our preachers a most powerful hermeneutical and homiletical device to assist them in the task of preaching. Much is still to be done, but we are closer now than we have ever been before.

Pastoral Theology

Sole responsibility for moving toward excellence in ministry among postmodern Americans influenced by pluralism cannot be placed before preachers or homileticians alone. It has to be shared with others engaged in the task of living out a pastoral theology in the present-day American setting. Perhaps one of the most serviceable contributions from that field to the present discussion would be a model, a proposal for how we can get started. Such a model could reflect sensitivity to ancillary challenges raised: developing an awareness of the cognitive processes of cultural groups and contextualizing the Christian faith through evangelism,

discipleship, preaching, and teaching.

Should American pastoral theologians have to concern themselves with becoming aware of the cognitive processes of distinctive cultural groups? Do people who minister in America today really need to take such a matter under consideration?

Tex Sample thinks so. A pastoral theologian, he has devoted himself to exploring for the purposes of ministry the cognitive processes of one expression of pluralism located in America: oral culture. This cultural group incorporates literally millions of Americans whose mode of communication is more oral than literary. As you would guess, this group includes those Americans who are functionally illiterate as well as those who are inclined toward a visual and experiential orientation as opposed to one more dominated by logic and reason.⁷

How do pastoral theologians propose that we minister among such a cultural group? The suggestions offered by missiologists sound inviting, though they may be more than a little difficult to put into practice. But when you consider them, something seems to be missing from the discussion. Or better, some one is missing.

Doing ministry in an oral culture, or any other cultural group in America for that matter, cannot be merely the work of suggestions and papers. Neither can the theological finger be pointed to the church in general. It doesn't do any good to take the churches to the woodshed again and thrash them into doing better. No, the discussion must become more directed to the missing ingredient, or person, namely the pastor.

How can a pastor these days do ministry in an oral culture? He can begin by learning the

⁷Tex Sample, *U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches: A Key to Reaching People in the 90's* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990); *Blue-Collar Ministry: Facing Economic and Social Realities of Working People* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984); *Ministry in an Oral Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

cognitive processes of his people and seeking to contextualize the trust given him by Christ.

A good starting point is 2 Tim. 2:2, a clear instruction from Paul to Timothy to pass along the trust the elder apostle had previously given the young pastor. What had been entrusted to him? Was it a set of rules, principles, or a creed? I don't think so. Rather, it was a life in Christ modeled by Paul for Timothy to embrace and, in turn, to model before the people of his church, a group of culturally distinct folks who had a particular worldview and a unique cognitive process.

Somewhere in the metaphor of the trust passed along, a pastor can find his motivation for going the distance in communicating and nurturing what has been entrusted to him by Christ. Again, what he has been entrusted with is not a set of rules or a list of ways to be Christian. Deposited in his heart is a life to be passed on to others with whom God has called him to minister.

Suppose that pastor, named Neil for our purposes, has been called to a church filled with people of an oral culture. You do not necessarily have to assume that it is a rural church. Though that is probably the most obvious expression of oral culture, it is not the only one. Oral culture exists in even the most crowded cities. The question is: how can Neil reach these people, work with them, and at times put up with them?

Sample can help him. According to his research, he noticed that people in an oral culture thought in terms of stories and proverbs, relationships, apprenticeship, and tacit understanding.⁸ If the pastor could learn this cognitive process, he could use it as a conduit for passing along the trust.

Learning it, however, will take time, perhaps years. Neil will need to determine that he will stay put; it may take a while. If he chooses to stay there only long enough to build up his

⁸Sample, *Oral Culture*, 13-28.

resume, he can forget about doing much long-lasting good in such a setting.

One of his first priorities is to listen to the shared stories of his people. They are important because in one way or another they have been the stuff out of which community proverbs have emerged. The proverbs reflect what the community has decided to value.

Sometimes the proverbs and the stories behind them don't make sense to him. At times, he'd like to challenge them in his sermon, calling them what he thinks they are: heresy. He would like to be able to tell the people to forget those stories. He has biblical principles they can write down on the listening sheets in their worship guides. Since he has learned how to delineate them simply and clearly, he's sure they can grasp them as he did.

But they won't. So he takes his time, learns their stories and begins to incorporate the biblical story into the conversation in the pulpit, at the hospital bedsides, and in the homes of his people. Somehow along the way they begin to trust him and begin to relate to him as a pastor, not as an outsider who came in with books and lectures to colonize them.

Along the way he gains a hearing. Although his people have not grasped fully what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, they have come to trust their pastor to teach them.

They don't learn well in a classroom setting alone, so Neil tries teaching them in another way. He spends time personally with the ones who seem to be most interested. That means he helps church people who are grappling with the implications of Christian integrity as they work the midnight shift on the assembly line at the plant. He spends time with some of his teenagers at school who are trying desperately to be a Christian on campus but just don't know how. He listens to a person share her story of a painful episode in her past, leaving out none of the sordid details in search of a way to leave the emotional baggage at the cross like the told her to in his Sunday sermon.

Like any other pastor, Neil may need help. Sometimes the help is given in the form of a crusty little lady who doesn't know theology as well as she knows swear words. But she is good at contextualizing.

Sample related a story about a situation much like the one I'm describing. Jimmy Hope was dying of cancer, and his pastor came by to see him. In the conversation, he asked the pastor some questions about death and dying. Patiently, the pastor surveyed with Jimmy the five stages of grief. Jimmy was not all that impressed.

Then Zoni, Jimmy's friend, came into the bedroom. She surveyed the situation, chatted for a while, and got up to leave. But before she walked out the door, she said to Jimmy, "If you believe God and you live, it's all right. And if you believe God, and you die, it's still all right. You see, Buford [Jimmy's other name], it don't make a [expletive deleted] bit of difference whether you live or die. If you believe God, it's all right."⁹

There. That's contextualization. Jimmy didn't need to know all the facts and categorize them. For him and people of his culture, many truths are assumed. They only needed to be shared in symbols that operated for him.

On the other side of town, a large church kept getting larger. The pastor of that church spoke at a number of preaching and evangelism conferences. He had been invited because his church grew so fast. Maybe he had come to understand that same thing Neil was learning: when you learn how people think and contextualize, you can pass along the trust to the next generation of believers. The pastor of the big church had led his congregation to grow, and Neil became happy for them. In his church, Neil had helped his congregation to grow up. That, for him, was pretty important too. In both churches, the trust had been passed along.

⁹Ibid., 94.

The possibility for contextualizing as it has been fashioned into the shape of Neil's ministry in a setting characterized by oral culture can hopefully be considered as a point of beginning for ministry in postmodern America. Perhaps it will at least present to us the notion that it's a reasonable challenge, one that is not so large that God cannot enable us to do it well.

Add to that the need to help preachers develop listener-centered messages that are firmly grounded in God's Word and communicated in ways that allow the trust to be passed along to the next generation of believers. The conclusion we can make is relatively obvious: we have a lot of work to do.