

What is biblical preaching?

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I. Introduction

In this paper I will outline my understanding of biblical preaching on the light of the work in class. First of all, I will define what is biblical preaching. Then, I will discuss the elements that make preaching “biblical”.

II. Definition: the criteria for biblical preaching

My first reaction toward the phrase “biblical preaching” is to think that it is a tautology. For me, preaching is nothing but the exposition of the Gospel in fidelity to the Scripture. However, after thinking it over, I realize that there are specific criteria by which we can call certain style of preaching “biblical”. Thus, the question that I will address in this paper is “What makes a style of preaching 'biblical'?”

Biblical preaching occurs when there is a positive correlation between the content, the function and the form of the sermon and the biblical text. To put it in a different way, it is “to shape sermons in ways coherent with the dynamic, multiform address of that [God] word.” [\[1\]](#)

Let us explore now the elements that make preaching “biblical.”

III. Content

A biblical sermon presents today, in a relevant way, theological insights that come out of a valid interpretation of the text. [\[2\]](#)

As we know, the Bible is a text. As a text, from a hermeneutical point of view, it is detached from its authors and its original audience. So, the Bible —as a text— has a certain degree of autonomy from its original contexts. when the modern interpreter reads the Scripture, the biblical text addresses her or him in a particular way. The reader, then, has new insights about the meaning of the text; the text has triggered a fresh interpretation of its message according its surplus of meaning.

These new insights about the text must be validated by the critical work of the interpreter. By this I mean that the fresh ideas triggered by the new reading of the text must be tested against two criteria. The first one is the canon. The Bible is one book that has major theological themes running from Genesis to Revelation. Our new insights about the text must be in basic agreement with the thematical axes that we find in the Bible.

The second criteria against which our new reading of the text must be contrasted is the particular theological outlook of the text. As we know, the biblical writers addressed different situations, reinterpreting the traditions in the light of their time. Therefore, the different biblical documents have particular theological outlooks.

Once we have tested our new insights of the text against the key theological outlook of the biblical document in particular we have an interpretation that is valid. This does not mean that is the only interpretation that is valid. This does not mean that is the only interpretation possible, but that it is a legitimate new reading of the text. Then, we can proceed to study hermeneutical implications of the text or our modern audience.

At this point, I should point the reason why I have defined content in terms of their theological claim of the text. Sometimes we hear sermons based in the Scriptures in which the preacher relays heavily in the biblical story. However, at the moment of the application the text is interpreted in the light of a broad umbrella —like theological concept. This is usually the case with the concept of love. Some preachers will find a romantic pseudo-Johannine concept of love in every text of the Bible. This instead of an expository sermon is a generic one that is not true to the Scripture or relevant to the audience.

IV. Function

The biblical texts were written with specific intentions. The authors wanted something to happen to their audiences. To achieve their purposes they employed forms and rhetorical devices that provoked different reaction in the hearers. Although the original intention of the original authors is now largely lost, the form of the biblical documents still evokes particular feelings in the audience, provoking thus different reactions. Some texts give a word of judgment, other a word of hope, still other a word to transform. This reaction that text causes in the audience is what I call the function of the text. A sermon proves to be biblical when it has the same function that the text has.

The function of a text can be determined with certain accuracy through form criticism. Then through the hermeneutics of analogy, [3] we can find points of contact between the experiences depicted in the text and our audience, making the function of the text especially relevant to the contemporary hearers.

Although this hermeneutical method can be employed in almost any context, it is very particularly useful in Latin America, [4] where the sociology of oppression, the politics of domination, the extreme poverty and the hope for a new order resemble so closely the situations portrayed in the Bible.

Another important element is the vantage point from which the preacher tells the biblical story. It is really difficult to identify with a preacher that always takes a distant position as the authoritative voice in the story. The preacher must identify himself with the congregation. Furthermore, the preacher must practice what he preaches, adopting “a total style of life which embodies the spirit of the crucified Christ.” [5]

V. Form

It is not without certain reluctance that I include form as a criterion for biblical preaching. I really think that the preacher should master first the traditional forms and the deductive logic before going ahead with the design of inductive sermons and experimental forms. Having made this warning, I should say that ideally the biblical preacher should make the most of the text by designing the sermon in the form of the text.

The reason to design sermons in the form of the text is basically that the function of the text is achieved in part by the movement of the form of the text. [6] Let us take, for example, the Psalm of Lament. The function of the lament is to give hope to the person that prays the psalm, restoring in that way the person to the faithful community. By and large, the lament achieves its function by a sudden movement from lament to praise. This movement from hurt to joy reassures the person about God's loving concern, solidarity and sense of justice. Then, the one who prays can experience a healing feeling of hope in God's fidelity.

By far, it is easier to achieve the function of the Psalm of lament if we incorporate in our sermon a movement from lament to praise.

VI. Conclusion

As we have seen, preaching is truly biblical when there is a positive correlation between the content, the function and the form of the text. [7] The task of the biblical preacher is, therefore, to let the text speak [8]; to allow the text to witness about God to the congregation; to let the theological insights of the text, calm the lives of the audience for God.

VII. Endnotes

1. Don M. Wardlaw, ed., **Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture** (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), pp.61-62.
2. Severino Croatto, “La contribución de la hermenéutica bíblica a la Teología de la Liberación”, **Cuadernos de teología VI**, (no.4, 1985):45-69. [E.T. “Biblical Hermeneutics in the theologies of liberation” in **Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology** (New York: Orbis Books, 1983):140-168.]
3. Walter Brueggemann, “As the text makes sense”, **The Christian Ministry** 14 (Summer '83):8.

4. Justo L. González and Catherine G. González, **Liberation Preaching: The pulpit and the Oppressed** (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1980),p.16. See Also Elsa Tamez, **Bible of the Oppressed** (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), pp.66-67 and Croatto, op.cit., pp.59-60.

5, William Baird, “Biblical Preaching as Incarnational Preaching”, **Lexington Theological Quarterly** 16 (January 1981):111.

6. Elizabeth Achtemeier, **Creative Preaching: Finding the Words** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980),p.61.

7. For similar statements see Leander E. Keck, **The Bible in the Pulpit: The renewal of biblical preaching** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980) and Achtemeier, op.cit.,p.61.

8. Richard C. White, “Building Biblical Semons”, **Lexington Theological Quarterly** 18 (April 1983):43-51.