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**Persuasion in preaching**

Preaching as persuasion

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Let's consider the following three aspects of preaching as persuasion:

- the preacher's perspectives on preaching;
- the effect of the character of the message upon persuasion; and
- insights into the hearer of the message.

Both ethical and practical aspects will be dealt with together, being entwined concepts in preaching as in many other forms of persuasion.

The preacher's perspectives

Accepting that preaching often falls short of the ideals expressed here, these ideals properly form the basis of the perspective of the preacher upon preaching.

Love is the first perspective the preacher brings to preaching. It is to be contrasted with a preacher being motivated by greed. A popular example of such is the televangelist who, although compelling, charismatic and possessing a degree of mojo, is motivated by greed and self-interest which undermines the message. It is difficult to envisage anything as unpersuasive as the televangelist who prioritises self-interest.

Love is to be further contrasted with preaching to gain a position of power and influence, or with preaching in order to obtain a self-following, in order to recruit disciples for the preacher. In each case the underlying motivation on the part of the preacher

acts to undermine the message and is counter to persuasion.

Love on the part of the preacher is categorized as being a higher quality than even persuasiveness. Anyone who has attended a wedding is likely to have heard the following from the New Testament's 1 Corinthians 13:1, which makes this point on the primacy of love:

'If I speak with the tongue of angels, but have not love then I am a clanging cymbal, a ringing gong.'

This does not belittle persuasion in preaching, but directs that the persuasion always be in the context of love. The question then arises as to what quality love will give to preaching. Love is well described as the putting of another's interests ahead of your own.

This means that preaching is to be undertaken in order to benefit the listener, rather than to benefit the preacher. The act of persuasion is directed to the benefit of the hearer.

The second perspective is that the preacher is acting as an ambassador for Christ. What this means is that not only is the preacher speaking for the benefit of the hearer, but is also speaking on behalf of Christ rather than on behalf of himself or herself. What this distils to is that the preacher must not confuse the messenger with the message; that is, the preacher must not become the message, but must remain the messenger.

The third perspective for the preacher is that persuasion is to be without cunning or deceit. This perspective

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flows readily when consideration is given to for *whom* the preacher is an ambassador, and when consideration is given to the object of the persuasion being to benefit the hearer.

The fourth perspective for the preacher is that the preacher does not bear the ultimate burden in persuasion. That is, the preacher speaks on the basis that it is God who ultimately changes hearts. The attitudinal outworking of this is that the preacher is to approach the task of persuasion with humility.

The significance of the message for persuasion

Although not of universal application, in many cases the subject-matter affects the mode of persuasion. A trite example is the inappropriateness of the use of a limerick to warn that a building is on fire.

One methodology of preaching reliant upon the subject matter is expository preaching. This can be described as the process of exposing the message of a passage of the Bible hand in hand with exposing the inner workings of the listener to the message. An example of this process from John 20:24–31 is as follows (noting the context is that Jesus has been crucified and has risen from the dead at this point of John's gospel).

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the 12 was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'

But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.'

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'

Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'

Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples,

which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The themes that can be exposed from this passage include the following.

Death

- the death of God's chosen one, the Christ, the one foretold by the prophets,
- the death of the hope attached to Jesus, and
- despair, fear and disenchantment on the part of his disciples.

Resurrection

- from the dead,
- realisation that Jesus is in fact the chosen one, the Saviour, and
- hope restored.

Doubt

- how could Jesus have risen from the dead — it does not happen, and
- unless it can be touched, seen or smelt, it cannot be believed.

Belief

- seeing, touching, belief, and
- the impossible happening.

Lord and God

- that God can be known, and in this moment in history, touched, and
- that Jesus is Lord and God.

Life

- the implication that belief in Jesus is life,
- not religious ritual,
- not a list of good deeds, commandments or a ledger of right and wrong,
- but belief in Jesus as Lord and God is life. The proposition for the preacher is that the message itself bears power. There is no need for amendment of such a powerful message, simply for its preaching and proclaiming. The question arises then as to the technique in order to bring intersection between the message and the hearer, bringing exposure to the message and exposure to the hearer, so that the inner workings of the hearer are brought together with the facets of the message.



The hearer

Before turning to technique, it is useful to examine the hearer. A preacher faces two typical gigs. One can be described as preaching to those inside the in-group, the converted or at least sympathetic. The difficulty with such a task arises from the week in week out contact with the same group, so that they become desensitised to the preacher, used to his or her persuasive moves.

The second is the out-group. Those who have been dragged along, those who are curious, the hostile, the sceptical and also those who hunger.

In either case the preacher is dealing with matters intimately personal and touching upon the very fabric of life. One particular role of the preacher is to remove all barriers to the message. These include the removal of cultural barriers, in a manner described in the Bible as becoming all things to all men. If speaking to a Jewish audience (often the case in the early church), then speaking in a manner sensitive to that audience.

In the process of bringing the intersection of the exposure of the message with the exposure of the hearer, two particular techniques can be useful, being illustration and application.

Illustration

If the punch line of the passage set out above is, 'so that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, The Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name' then an objective is to illustrate so as to expose the substance of the passage. The particular aspect that the preacher may grapple with is the surprising notion that life is not bought from God with good deeds, but comes with belief.

The appropriate picture or illustration for life is perhaps not the grocery store, as if life can be bought like carrots, milk or cabbages. A better picture comes from the operating theatre, from the man or woman whose heart has failed and who desperately needs a transplant. A heart cannot be bought, not even from a corpse. A heart must come as a gift. The same applies in the current instance. Life from God cannot be bought with a list of good deeds. It flows from belief as a gift.

The point of the illustration is the use

of a picture as a parallel to explain. Here the picture is chosen to bring home the notion that not all that is precious is for sale. There are undoubtedly better pictures that can be brought to mind, such as the love of a child or a parent and it is the role of the preacher to look for the example that will illustrate life from God being a gift and to speak that strongly to the listener.

Application

Application derives importance from the fact that preaching is not just the transfer of information. It is similar to the difference between a person giving intellectual assent to the idea that Australia ought to be a republic and a person committing themselves and their actions to achieving such an aim.

In the current example the application may be persuading people not to fall into the trap of thinking that going to church and performing religious ritual buys life from God. The application is the change in the dynamic of the listener, so that the message heard changes action, whether that action is an internal attitude or an external activity.

Conclusion

The character of the preacher as persuader is important because the motivation of the persuader can undermine the message. The motivation and approach of the persuader can also give credibility to the message.

The approach of the expository preacher is to expose the message and to expose the listener, and to bring the two together like meshing wheels within a gearbox.

A particular technique is to illustrate and apply. Illustration seeks to make concepts clear through drawing a parallel picture. Importantly, application seeks to put what is revealed into practice, that the relationship between the hearer and the message, as facilitated by the preacher, is a dynamic one, not simply persuasion as to information, but persuasion as to the substance revealed by the message. ●

Shane Gill is a Canberra barrister with a practice in criminal defence work and family law. He took time away from studying law to attend a missionary and bible college. Preaching fascinates him.