

“Connected Preaching” and Theological Education

by Dr. Gerhard H. Visscher

2 Timothy 3:16-17 *“All Scripture is . . . useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

A headline caught my attention a number of weeks ago. It read: “Forget Generation Y: 18-to 34-year Olds are now ‘Generation C’.”¹ It went on to talk about people in this category being the most connected of all generations because of all their digital devices. It’s generation C, connected, because “they consume media, socialize and share experience through devices more than other age groups.” According to some, this kind of connectedness is integral to postmodernity; people living in this fragmented society

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¹
<http://mashable.com/2012/02/23/generation-c>. Accessed April 24, 2012.

have more autonomy and are able to create their own environment. The electronic gadgets and the social media of Twitter and Facebook, and whatever else, allows them to let in people and things that matter and shut out that which doesn’t. Everyone gets to easily create his or her own environment, and whatever works for you is just great.

Now my point is not that we must now use all of this media to do our work (although I think there are definite advantages), but my point is that *effective and powerful preaching must necessarily take into account this accent on “connectivity.”* We are preaching to a generation and a culture that like never before is making daily decisions, consciously and unconsciously, to turn off and turn on, to let in and to block out. And it’s not just a select number of people who are like this. Preachers are speaking to listeners who come with clickers in their heads. They are used to flicking through the channels, deciding in twenty seconds whether to turn off or turn on; they are quite accustomed to flipping through magazines and websites scanning headlines and first sentences that seem

interesting, skipping over the vast majority. Never before has it been as urgent for preachers to engage in what I want to call “connected preaching.”

The preacher today, to be sure, has to be “connected” in many ways. Above all, he has to be connected to **God**, through prayer and an appropriate personal godly lifestyle, connected to the Word, and to the culture. No man is an island. But today, in preaching, he really has to work extra hard so that people will let him in. He has to convince them that his message really matters to them.

Let me suggest to you that there are two kinds of preaching: “connected” and “disconnected” and let me sketch for you what they are like. It should be said from the outset that no one is really entirely in the one or entirely in the other; it is more like a continuum, and every sermon can be found somewhere along this line.

Disconnected Preaching?

“Disconnected preaching,” in its extreme, is where it does not matter whether you prepared this sermon last week or last century; it is not specifically directed to one

congregation, but vague enough for all; it has no allusions to what happens in the world today, nor in the lives of the people of God today. It is strictly busy with the exegetical and dogmatic details of the text, finds its introduction within the text or the context, and has little or no application. While the motives of the preacher here may be as honorable as ever, and the sermon may be ever so doctrinally correct, and even Spirit driven, the preacher here makes no attempt to connect with the pew, or to help the pew go home with an awareness of how this sermon impacted them. The only ones who are really following the sermon and really interested are those who are already mature in the faith, theologically astute, and biblically knowledgeable. All others, including today’s youth, would have little or no ability after the service to express what the sermon was actually about. In fact, without a bulletin in front of them, they probably can’t even tell you what the text of the sermon was. This is probably one major reason why so many Reformed people are listening to the John MacArthur and Alistair Beggs of this world on the side; it is not because they are more

doctrinally correct or exegetically sound; I suspect it is because these kind of preachers are better at connecting with them and their world.

Purpose of Scripture

In my view, “disconnected preaching” has failed to meet the biblical goals of preaching. Just look for a moment at 2 Timothy 3:16. I have deliberately left some words out not because I don’t believe them – of course, I do. The Scriptures are the God-breathed, inspired, authoritative words of God, beyond a doubt. But while that is the major reason most people bring up this text, I believe that Paul’s first intent in this context was not to remind Timothy about their God-breathed character, but the dying Paul is seeking to remind young Timothy about the relevance of these Scriptures and why he really needs to preach them: because those OT Scriptures which he heard about from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5) and were later added to by way of those who wrote New Testament Scriptures are so very useful. It’s a very pragmatic purpose. It is this very body of Scripture which will keep Timothy faithful even despite

persecutions (3:12). It is this very body of Scripture which has the power to turn Timothy and all those in his charge into men and women of God who are righteous and equipped for every good work.

Notice, by the way, that while you could translate it “every Scripture,” translations don’t do that because Paul is not saying that every passage of Scripture has this power. We can all cite passages that we would never preach on even if we had a million years to preach. But he is saying that that body of writings, inspired by God, is “*useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*” And if elsewhere Paul’s writings are thought to be a model for preaching,² so they are here too. Paul’s writings are driven by the occasion, shaped by the needs of his hearers; even if we long for more indicators regarding the situation of the first readers, there is plenty even for today’s readers to feel the

² Cf my article, How Should the Pulpit Address the Pew? Some Lessons from Paul” *Clarion* 42, no 55 (2006). (Cf. *Lux Mundi* 26 March 2007).

impact of these words both then and now.

Connected Preaching

So what is “connected preaching”? It is more than just preaching that has application, as essential as that is.

It has to do with *text choice* already. Not every Scripture passage speaks to the occasion one is in. Appropriate text choice has to do with finding a good answer to the “so what?” question. So, what will this passage say to the people? What message will it send them home with?

It has to do with ***a love for the people of God***. Preachers have to love their people. Preachers who begin to berate, scorn, and otherwise show that they look down on their people, would be better off to stay home and leave the ministry. Think of Paul who, despite the abuse he suffers even from his own people, is always going on about his love for them. His love in Christ. For the right connection to be made, preachers have to love the people so that they passionately want them to get the message, and to be affected by it and all its nuances.

It has to do with the ***introduction***. Preachers have about two minutes at the beginning of every sermon to convince the hearer that this message is something they need to hear. You have to motivate them to get on this train before it leaves the station. The best introductions are ones that are so engaging that almost effortlessly everyone is on board. Connections have to be made at the very beginning; while reconnecting is possible later, it is so much more difficult.

It has to do with ***a solid and easy to follow argument*** thereafter. Once the hearers are onboard, convinced that the topic is relevant and the journey is worthwhile, they will be quite willing to listen to some heavier exegetical or doctrinal content for a while.

It has to do with ***application***. Preachers often suggest that the application is something the hearers can do themselves later; they’ll just stick to the theory, and let the pew worry about its practical consequences. Such preachers will be very surprised then by the kind of applications that people actually draw, if they draw any. I think this confuses implication and

application. While the implications of a given message may be different from person to person, the application seeks to force out the text into today's audience as far as it can while still saying "thus says the Lord." While preachers have no right to insist on their own opinion regarding a matter (their opinions don't get elevated to divine status just because they are in the pulpit), they have a solemn duty to help people understand the practical differences and consequences of a given passage or doctrine. This is especially where the preaching is *administered* to the people of God by men called to be *ministers*. It all has to do with a level of connectivity that is there throughout the preaching. Preachers who refuse to do this, would do well to consider carefully the purpose of Scripture and hence of preaching on the Scriptures, according to Paul.

It has to do with ***the occasion***. In my twenty-two years of pastoral ministry I realize that the most powerful preaching moments were times when great tragedy hit the congregation -- a premature death, a time when someone's personal failure is disclosed, or some such thing. Then the pew is, as it were,

straining forward for comfort and direction to the pulpit, and the pulpit has little difficulty making the connection and moving on to pastor the hearts and lives of the people of God.

It has to do with an awareness of ***the culture of the day***. I don't mind mentioning that as a young person, it was not the church that convinced me that it was relevant to the world; it was men like Francis Schaeffer who in the sixties and seventies connected with us because he understood our culture so well. And for all my criticisms of N.T. Wright,³ I think he is the same kind of person: acutely aware, despite his age, of where our culture and our youth are at. We only get that by being well-read and daring to venture out into that world ourselves.

It has to do with ***the whole person***. Essentially, "disconnected preaching" in the extreme is convinced that all that's needed in preaching is some more information. The right weekly dose of extra information pored into their

³ See my *Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul: Faith Embraces the Promise*. (Peter Lang Press, 2009) 19-25 and throughout the rest of the book.

brains will do what is necessary. I believe that this is really a fruit of enlightenment philosophy. The enlightenment taught that information is the key. If only we give them more information, everything will be fine. Those who think thus ought to read James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*.⁴ Therein he rightly argues that man is not first of all a thinking being, but first of all a desiring being, a worshiping being. Not *homo rationale* but *homo liturgicus*. It resonates with a Scriptural theme. It's not just *information* that's needed, it's *transformation*. The people of God don't just need more information; they need to be changed from the inside out by the power of the Spirit of God who works through the preached Word. God is not just trying to make corrupt people a little better. He is recreating them. He is making them new by the blood of Christ. And if connected preaching has to do with the whole person, that applies not just to the whole person of the hearer, but also the whole person of the preacher. Connected preaching is not just one

brain connecting with all those other brains out there. It is heart to heart communication about the things that matter in a world that has gone wrong to a people gone wrong about what God is doing in Christ to repair the wrongs to the depth of our being and to the ends of the earth. It necessarily involves also the preacher's intellect, emotions, heart and life, and its goal is not just to feed the brains of the people of God; instead, the goal throughout the sermon must be: *how can I reach their hearts? How can I best be an instrument of the Holy Spirit whereby He truly turns their hearts to the glory and praise of God?* That starts already with text-choice, and with the introduction. Speaking about the introduction to a sermon, one author says:

“If the opening sentence aims at the listener's head, the development must aim at the heart. This is the most critical step in the introduction. Fail here, and we imply that we will be talking about a subject rather than speaking to living, breathing, feeling, needy people. Succeed here, and

⁴ Baker Academic, 2009.

people will be unable to pull away from the sermon.”⁵

Preaching is not just a matter of lecturing the people of God about how things were thousands of years ago in a land far away to a people long dead. Nor is it a matter of broadcasting some news in radio announcer style.

As James Daane puts it:
“This is the agony and the glory, the power and the foolishness, the high honor and awesome responsibility of the Christian minister. The Christian ministry functions on the borderline between the cross and the resurrection, between heaven and hell. This frontier is no place for the faint-hearted; those who have little faith in the message and its power do not belong in the pulpit.”⁶

This is why connected preaching also has to do with ***the person of the preacher***. Paul had it right. The Scriptures have a lofty goal. But if Timothy’s hearers are

⁵ Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching that Connects: Using Techniques of Journalists to Add Impact* (Zondervan, 2009). P. 38.

⁶ *Preaching with Confidence: A Theological Essay on the Power of the Pulpit*, Eerdmans, 1980, p. 29

going to be trained in righteousness, equipped for every good work it must begin by Timothy himself being a man of God who is so trained, corrected and complete.

In the words of Joseph M. Stowell III,

The most powerful sermons are forged out of the heart of a preacher who has sought to live out the principle of the text in the week or weeks prior to its presentation. Sermons forged in life smack of the reality of life and will find easy transition into the life of a listener. Sermons formed only in the mind of the preacher will probably affect little more than the mind of the listener.

And again:

While it is true that transformation is the work of the text under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and that it is he who will ultimately do the convicting, comforting, healing, helping, encouraging, motivating and transforming; it is also true that our messages are the conduit. We

craft the instrument. He is the enablement. Our challenge is to do our best to create a useful tool in the Master's hand."⁷

Seminary Education

And that leads me to some other thoughts about seminary education. Thoughts about which I'd like to get some feedback from men who have been to seminary and are now in the ministry.

This is the issue. *If it is connected preachers rather than disconnected ones that we want, how do we shape young men to be like that?* It will obviously take more than just handing out iPhones and iPads, as much as our students would love to receive them.

But think about this: is it not true that if preaching is only about excavating exegesis and building dogmatic constructions, then academics is all there is to seminary education, but if preaching is more than that, if preaching is about the whole person, then seminary education needs to be more than that as well.

⁷ "Preaching for a Change," *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to the Pulpit*, 144.

I am deliberately again exaggerating things, but sometimes there may have been an approach to seminary education which looked like this: *here is this mass of information which you need to have, and over four years of education we as professors are going to do our best to implant it all into your brain, and the degree to which you'll be able to receive all this data will determine the answer to the question whether you will be a good pastor.*

Dan Allender, a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary, writes this in book called *Leading with a Limp*:

The training process for leaders – secular or religious – can usually be broken into three areas content, skill and ethics/character. At the seminary I attended, 90 percent of the curriculum was devoted to content, 10 percent focused on skill, and our character and ethics, or how we lived in relationship with others, was never addressed beyond a few talks in chapel. It was assumed that who we were as people and how we related to others had been addressed prior to our arrival at seminary. The

place for personal growth was thought to be the church, not the seminary. The seminary trained men and women in the Bible, theology, church history, and other academic rigors, and then it taught those who would pastor how to preach and conduct themselves in the church. Practical skills were assumed to be learned from classroom input and field experience

We enable troubled and manipulative men . . . to devour their colleagues, their staffs, and their congregations simply because they've passed exams, written papers, matriculated through a degree, and gained the credentials to be called professionals.”⁸

Accreditation

It is also because of these kind of concerns that the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary, which recently was granted full accredited status by the Association of Theological Schools, is very grateful for the process of

⁸ *Leading with a Limp : Take Full Advantage of your Most Powerful Weakness.* Waterbrook Press, 2006 Location 401.

accreditation in which much has been learned. The process has led to much consideration and reflecting on what seminary education should look like, as we seek to ensure that theological education is more well rounded than it used to be.

In the ATS standards about the M.Div. degree, for instance, one finds these kind of statements:

- “The program shall provide opportunities to develop a critical understanding of and creative engagement with the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission” (A.2.3).
- “The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of capacities – intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public – that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership” (A.2.4).
- “Faculty shall relate the insights of their disciplines to the practice of ministry and shall be attentive to students’ spiritual

development and professional growth” (A.3.3.2.1).⁹

While there is no intent to reduce the necessarily academically rigorous program, there is now a more conscious and deliberate attempt to bring both cultural and personal elements to the fore. Presently, this is being done by means of

- the Pastoral Training Program, wherein more attention is paid to the personal and practical component of ministry;
- a mentorship program whereby each professor attempts to mentor a number of students;
- seminars and readings that focus also on personal formation and pastoral leadership;
- building personal and cultural objectives into the projected course outcomes;
- being more generally aware of these necessary components throughout the seminary training.

In the service of the King and his church, nothing is too much. Thus, CRTS attempts to do everything

possible to prepare young men to be the best ministers of the Word they possibly can be. And that means: biblically faithful, doctrinally sound, and confessionally strong, but also personally and spiritually mature as well as culturally aware and engaged.

May also this labour of love lead God’s people to the increased praise and adoration of or glorious God.

Other Resources:

Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. NAVPress, 2002

Mark Galli, *Preaching that Connects: Using Techniques of Journalists to Add Impact* Zondervan, 2009

Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, BakerBooks, 2001

Chuck Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders: Integrating spiritual formation and leadership Development*. Xulon Press, 2007.

⁹ See “Educational and Degree Program Standards” on www.ats.edu.