
Pointed Preaching

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Preaching which is not pointed is not preaching

This is why Spurgeon said, “Where the application begins, there the sermon begins.” This is why John A. Broadus wrote, “The application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but is the main thing to be done”. This is why Daniel Webster declared, “When a man preaches to me, I want him to make it a personal matter, a personal matter.” This is why Geoffrey Thomas wrote fairly recently, “There is no more common cause of ineffective ministry than a failure in applicatory preaching”. This is why John F. Bettler exclaims, “Preaching is not speaking about truth before the congregation, but rather speaking truth to the congregation”.

But are these men right? Of course they are! Here are three reasons which prove it:

(i) **It is the Bible that we preach; but why did God give us the Bible?** He did it to enlighten our minds, with a view to transforming our lives. Nothing in the Bible is written just to satisfy our curiosity. It is all there to bring us to repentance, to bring us to the knowledge of God in our Lord Jesus Christ, and to progressively change us into His likeness. It follows, then, that any preaching of the Bible which does not deliberately *aim* to bring people to repentantly believe in Christ, and then to live in ever fuller obedience to Him, is not only a prostitution of preaching, but is a wicked misrepresentation of the Bible.

Paul, inspired of God, wrote, “Whatever things were written beforehand were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). In Paul’s mind, the Old Testament scriptures were written to instruct us, with a view to producing in us perseverance and encouragement. It follows that any instruction of the Bible which stops at mere instruction is perverting the purpose for which it was given. To declare Scripture is to *apply* it.

Again, Paul wrote, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16- 17). The Scriptures have not been given simply to inform our minds, but to teach us how to live in a godly way. All preaching of the Bible must therefore have the same purpose. If it does not, that preaching is unfaithful.

(ii) **The way the Bible talks about preaching proves these men right.** There are four great words for preaching in the New Testament. The most characteristic is *kerusso* which means “to proclaim as a herald”. The preacher is to announce a message which has been given to him, and which he has not invented himself. But we have already seen that the message of the Scriptures touches the *life*. Besides, would any herald proclaim a kingly message without telling his hearers what was expected of them?

A second great word is *euangelizo* which means “to announce good news”. But is good news announced *in front* of people, or *to* people? And is it not a fact that what is

good news for some is bad news for others? Can, then, the good news be announced without saying who it is for?

A third word is *martureo* which means “to bear witness to facts”. But if you declare facts, and nothing but facts, won’t your hearers simply respond by saying, “So what?”. Don’t you have to explain why these facts are important to *them*?

A fourth word is *didasko*, which means “to spell out in concrete terms what the message means as far as living is concerned”. Where there is no application, this has not been done.

In the New Testament these four words are used largely interchangeably, as any close study of the sacred text quickly reveals. That is, true preaching is composed of all four elements. It is beyond doubt, therefore, that application is part and parcel of New Testament preaching. The men we have quoted earlier are certainly right.

(iii) **Examples of biblical preaching prove the same thing.** The greatest Preacher of all was, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ. All His public teaching is composed of three strands which we may call *State, Illustrate, Apply*. These three strands are so closely woven together that it is sometimes impossible to say into which category a given sentence falls. This is because divine genius combines the three categories into a single plait. This can be borne out, for example, by a sentence- by-sentence study of Matthew 6:25-34. Our Lord knew nothing of preaching without application.

Nor did John the Baptist. An excellent sample of his preaching is found in Luke 3:7-18. So forcefully did he address the conscience that his hearers called out, “What shall we do then... Teacher, what shall we do?” (vv. 10,12). He then spelled out the implications of his teaching, not in vague generalities, but in precise directives. True preaching will always stir the heart to ask the same question, even if the question is not expressed audibly. True preaching will then answer the question it has provoked.

Our Lord’s apostles never forgot what they learned in His school. Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost was a frontal attack on the conscience of his hearers. “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). Doctrine led to application, and once the question above had been asked, more specific application followed. Doctrine leading to application was the apostolic method. This is seen repeatedly in the epistles. Instruction without pointed application is inconceivable in the mind of God. It should be the same in our minds too. Preaching which is not pointed is not preaching.

Three steps to making preaching pointed

In Matthew 6:1-18 our Lord talks to His disciples about almsgiving, prayer, and then fasting. On each occasion He tells them what to do, how they are to do it, and why it is worth doing. We have already seen that our Lord’s method was to *state, illustrate, apply*. We now learn that, in our Lord’s mind, the category labelled *apply* could be arranged into the these three sub-divisions.

(i) **What to do.** The truth has been preached and the hearers need to know what it means in practice. What are the demands that these particular truths make upon them?

Sometimes the focus is general. But sometimes it is sharp, which is why many passages of God’s Word speak directly to wives, husbands, children, masters, slaves, young people, older people, etc. The finger needs to be put on the infected spot. Each

individual needs to know that the message is for him, without feeling that the preacher has embarrassed him by singling him out particularly.

As preachers, we will accomplish this if our application is strictly limited to pointed lessons which *obviously* spring directly from the text or passage being studied. It would be foolish to draw out of the text absolutely every lesson which it has to teach, and we will restrict ourselves to those which are clearly important for the people in front of us. When this is done, our hearers will be aware that they are being addressed by the plain text of God's Word, and not by a man who sees himself as some sort of superior creature who has the right to tell others how to live. The preacher, with them, lives under the authority of the Word of God. The preacher, with them, bows to the Lordship of Christ. So even though, with all authority, he will say "you", he will apply the Word humbly, naturally and simply.

(ii) **How to do it.** Our Lord did not just tell His disciples about almsgiving, prayer and fasting. His telling them how to do it was a divine word, and therefore infallible. In our case, unless it is clearly stated on the pages of God's book, the "how to" instruction that we give will not be inspired. This must be made clear to all our hearers.

Here we are moving into the realm of helpful suggestions, and our congregation must understand this. The preacher has no legislative power, and we dare not bind people's consciences in areas where the Word of God does not specifically do so.

This said, it remains a fact that our people badly need this "how to" sort of application, and countless congregations are not getting it. For example, it is not enough to teach from the Scriptures that husbands and fathers are responsible before God for organising and conducting family worship. They need to know how to start it and what to do. It is not enough to tell people that their hands should be full of work for the kingdom of God. They need clear, concrete suggestions about what needs doing and how it can be done. It is not enough to tell elderly believers not to fear death. They need to know, in black-and-white terms, what to do when this fear seizes them.

Pointed preaching is not the same as whipping the congregation. Where there is plenty of "how to" application, our hearers will know that they have met a preacher with a pastoral heart. When you love the person you are speaking to, you don't simply tell them what to do. You tell them how to do it. This is how mothers teach their daughters to cook. This is how fathers teach their sons to kick a football. And this is how preachers teach their hearers to enter and to live the Christian life.

(iii) **Why it's worth doing.** We are now talking about persuasion – "we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11). To tell people what to do is seldom enough to move them to do it. Even when we have told them how to do it, there remains an immense gap between what they now see clearly and their actually getting around to doing it.

Preaching must stir. It must move people. It must persuade them; it must show them why what they have to do is worth doing. The human heart is so wicked that even when it knows what to do, and how to do it, it says, "Why bother? What's the point?" So we have got to show people why.

This does not mean that application has to be long-winded. We should aim to be brief, alive and direct. But our hearers must know that if they are going to please God, if they are going to glorify Him and bring Him honour, if they are going to know His blessing, if they are honest about wanting to walk the path of holiness, if they truly love

their neighbour as themselves – then they must go the way, and do the things, which the application has pointed out.

If there is a time in the message to be stirred, this is it! Was anyone ever stirred to do anything by a man who was not stirred himself? Can you arouse men and women if you are not aroused? Can you move them if you are not moved?

How does an infantry officer get his men to advance against the enemy? Is it just by coldly giving orders? Or is it by excitedly explaining why this particular battle must be won and what will happen if it is lost? Does he not feelingly explain his tactics before shouting passionately, “Come on now, let’s go”?

It is time to stir the feelings! Passion is not unction, but that does not make passion a sin. I am not talking about the artificial passion put on by actors, but that which is the fruit of feeling deeply about obedience to revealed truth. As a preacher, don’t you feel deeply? Isn’t God’s name shamed by the disobedience of the church? Aren’t thousands of professing believers courting sin and thus courting eternal danger? Aren’t countless numbers failing to know the full blessing of God on their lives because of ignorance and confusion? Aren’t there so many others who hear the Word of God every week, but who seem as far from conversion as ever? Isn’t it wonderful to walk with God, to see His Son, to enjoy His peace and experience His providing and leading? Why, then, is the pulpit so emotionally neutral? Shouldn’t it be a place of encouragement, of joy, of dancing? A place of tears, warning, compassion, pity? A place of anger, denunciation? So, then, there are three stages in making preaching pointed – and the man who knows what they are preaches with fire.

Practical advice on preaching pointedly

(i) **Know your people.** A visiting preacher cannot often do this, although he can try to get as much information as possible about his congregation before he speaks to them. But a regular preacher should be constantly asking himself questions about his people. Where are they up to, spiritually? Are they saved or lost? Are they growing or static? What are their particular joys, sorrows, trials, problems and temptations? What are their individual thought patterns? (because you are going to have to adapt your style accordingly). What obstacles are preventing them understanding or putting the truth preached into practice? What are their prejudices? Their misconceptions? What is their educational level? What illustrations would be best suited to them?

Our research must go on and on. We need to know what are the personal circumstances of every adult and child in the church. In our minds, we should be able to trace a typical day in the life of any one of them. We should know who are their relatives and friends, how they use their spare time, and what has been the course of their life so far. We cannot be satisfied until we know each one of them well.

To do this, we must spend time with them. Of course, it is good to have sustained conversations with them both before and after services. But this is not enough. They need to be in our home, and we need to be as often as possible in theirs. Preaching and pastoral work are intimately connected and our own thinking needs to underline this. We need to invent ways of spending time with our people, of doing things together with them, and of getting to know the children and young people as persons in their own right. Then we shall preach to people whom we *know* – and who also know us.

(ii) **Pray for your people.** Nobody to whom we preach regularly should be absent from our prayers. It is useful to have a prayer list arranged on a weekly or monthly basis so as to pray for them all. It is helpful to stop at different times of the day, and to imagine what different people in the congregation are doing at that moment. And why not sometimes go to the church building and sit in the place where such-and-such person usually sits? Imagine him or her listening to the next message you are going to give. How will it help them? What problems might they have in getting hold of it? What distractions are they likely to face? Is there anything in the building which you, as the preacher, could use to drive the truth home, or to cement it in place? And then pray for that person with all these things in mind.

(iii) **Prepare your preaching with your people in mind.** Not the congregation you would *like* to have, but the one that you *will* have!

Reflect on the text or passage from which you are going to preach. Ask yourself why the Holy Spirit put it in the Bible. Define this purpose in one sentence. Write out that sentence, using a second-person pronoun. Now prepare your message, making sure that everything in it furthers that purpose. From that text you are going to talk to your people about their souls and their lives. Ensure that your sub-headings *address* them, and do not just inform them. Put as much as possible into the second person.

As you are the Lord's man, why not follow the Lord's method? Divide your paper into three columns labelled *State, Illustrate, Apply*. In the first column write down all the information you are going to give. Now find or invent an illustration for each major item of teaching and put it in the second column. Sub-divide the third column into *What to do, How to do it, Why it's worth doing* and prepare suitable applications for each major item of teaching. Thoughtful and helpful application will now run throughout the whole sermon and attention is guaranteed. No one sleeps when their conscience is being touched, or when when their thinking and life are being helped!

(iv) **Then preach it!** For the sermon is nothing until it is preached. At this point we need to look each person in the eyes, to speak to him or her in a direct style using a natural voice, and to do it with overflowing love. This is not the time to have a thought for ourselves. We are seeking the glory of God and the good of every man, woman, boy and girl that we can see. Yes, preach straight at them. The time has come to fire your bullets, not into the sky, but directly at the conscience of every person present. Your mission is to change them – from sinners into saints, and from saints into saintlier saints!

Christian saw the picture of a very grave person hang up against the wall; and this was the fashion of it; it had eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of books in its hand, the law of truth was written upon its lips, the world was behind its back; it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over its head.

In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* this is the picture of the true gospel preacher that Christian saw in Interpreter's house. Who, amongst preachers, does not long to be such a man?

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