

Form Of The Sermon In Early Instruction Of Peoples Of Different Cultures

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Need for consideration of the topic

In our various mission fields and in the seminary training programs on these fields we are confronted with cultures and conditions that are different from those which exist back home, and yet at home and in all our fields we are trying to do the same things. We are seeking to preach the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as He has commanded us to do. One of the methods which we use is preaching the sermon. This we should consider what form a sermon or our preaching should take.

If there is any form that we might likely consider as typical or normal it would be the one with which we are most familiar and which has come to be normal or regular for us because this is the form that we are used to. Whatever we do or experience in our lives tends to become a part of us, of our way of living. It has an influence on us, or if you will it shapes our culture or determines more or less what we consider normal. This is also true in respect to our church life. Our idea of what is normal in respect to form will also reflect in a large measure our training. Applying this to the sermon and preaching it is only natural that we should consider as standard the form which we learned in our seminary training and which likely we have been using ever since. This is the sermon designed to fit into the congregational worship service.

This is not the only format the sermon or our preaching can take. but this form has become more or less standard for us because it meets our needs and not because it is the divinely instituted form which God requires of His pastors and preachers. We consider this form correct and best because it meets the needs of our people and fits the conditions under which we preach. In our seminary classes we were prepared for the conditions under which it was assumed we would be preaching. We weren't trained to preach on foreign mission fields, to teach homiletics to people of a different culture from our own, or to direct seminary training programs halfway around the world. We were being trained with the idea that upon graduation we would enter the ministry in one of the congregations or missions of Synod. Thus the homiletics we learned were directed toward preaching to people of our own culture and particularly for the preaching in the worship service of the Christian congregation. I remember one of our professors saying that we should assume that our hearers are all Christians. This is surely not something that we can assume on our mission fields. In his text *Homiletics* Dr. Reu makes no apology for this specific direction in the course or material that he presents, even though he recognized the need of preparation for missionary preaching, to people who are not Christian or to people of other cultures. This does not mean that we are finding fault with our seminary's program. We recognize that our seminary courses are designed to meet the needs of the church that it serves. It is because we want *our* Seminary training program to meet the need of the church it serves also that we are considering this matter of the form of the sermon for people of other cultures. The form that serves our church well at home is not automatically or because of its usefulness there the best form for use in our mission fields or in our mission churches. If there are different circumstances and different needs it is likely that a different form would suit our purposes better.. And since there is no divinely instituted form we do well to consider the matter before us.

I don't think there is any question that there are special or at least different circumstances and conditions on our mission fields and in our missions churches. We must take these things into consideration if we are to preach effectively or train men to preach effectively to their fellow countrymen.

Seeking the proper form

In giving consideration to the proper form of the sermon and preaching to people of different cultures we might experiment, use a trial and error method trying many different forms until we hit upon one that seems to work well. This method would surely take a long time. There are many possibilities and it would be difficult to try them all in a short time. We would also have to give each method time to prove itself be the results good or bad. But we don't have that much time. We don't know when the end will come and every day people are dying who need to hear the life-giving Gospel which we are to preach.

Another possibility would be to go about it scientifically enlisting the help of the specialists in human behavior, the psychologists the anthropologists, etc., but we are not completely in harmony with their ideas. We would do well to study the experts, the Lord Jesus and His apostles.

The Ministry of the Lord Jesus

The gospel records give us much information about the ministry of the Lord Jesus. It is not always in the detail which we would like, nor which might be just the thing we would want for the consideration before us. Again and again the evangelists tell us that Jesus went about preaching in every city and healing the sick. However, we are not often told what He preached, or how He preached it. Nevertheless, there is much can be learned about the way in which the Lord Jesus presented His message to the people of His day and in the area where He was active.

The main burden of His message was the declaration that the Kingdom of God had come and that He was the Messiah which had been promised, or the One for whom the Children of God had been waiting. He offered forgiveness of sins and everlasting life and invited people to believe in Him. All of Jesus' preaching was not limited to the spoken word. It sometimes took a form that we cannot learn or imitate. By means of His miracles and mighty acts Jesus preached effectively and gave testimony that could not be disputed that He was the Christ of God,

There are other features of the Lord's preaching that should occupy our attentions. One of these is His use of parables. He made extensive use of this form, that is the earthly story that taught a heavenly truth. The main feature of the parable is the comparison which leads one to understand this unknown through a comparison to something familiar or already known. Jesus didn't use this form exclusively, but He did use it extensively. It is said that one-third of the recorded teaching of Jesus consisted of parables. Whether this average was maintained in *all* of the teaching which He did is not known because we do not have a complete record. But we are safe in saying that Jesus *often* taught by means of parables and there must have been a good reason for doing so. His preaching had a purpose and was not just academic activity. We are told that the people among whom Jesus labored are especially partial to figurative speech and language and prefer it to a plain logical point by point presentation of matter. But there is another consideration in making the parable effective. The parables describe the Kingdom of God in action. They do not deal with abstract truths. They are rather descriptive, telling us in a vivid way that something that happens when God is busy re-establishing Himself as king among and over men. Parables are still effective today. When one hears or reads a parable of Jesus, he

is confronted by the necessity of making up his mind about Jesus Himself. The effectiveness of the parable does not depend only on knowing the customs of the practices of the times in which Jesus lived. It requires thought and involvement in order to see the point of comparison and the truth that is being illustrated. It appears that Jesus attempted to involve His hearers in His preaching and buy this means fix the truth He was declaring more firmly in the mind and heart. Certainly we should give consideration to parables as an effective form of preaching. It may be difficult to find fitting and applicable ones, but finding them we should be able to come through to our hearers. Is it a Chinese proverb that says that a picture is worth a thousand words? As we build our homiletical houses, we should be sure to include windows to let air and light in. Perhaps we would be more effective in our preaching if we were less dogmatic and abstract and more illustrative or informal. Fitting comparisons like the parables of Jesus should be helpful in aiding us to reveal the Grace of God in our gospel preaching and aid our hearers to grasp, understand and believe what would otherwise remain hidden and unknown.

Another notable feature of the Lord's preaching and teaching was the involvement of His hearers and those whom He taught. It appears that He sought to have His hearers participate rather than permit them to be like a sponge which absorbs water or like radio or TV receivers that pick up the waves that are being transmitted. We have many examples of this kind of activity, but perhaps we miss them because we do not consider this as preaching. There are those who make a very sharp distinction between preaching and teaching, but we are not doing this. For us, preaching should be teaching and teaching should be preaching. The biggest part of Jesus' preaching was informal and many times very personal on a one to one basis. This form fit the need and we can learn from Him because we are seeking to find forms that fit our needs and the needs of those whom we seek to teach or preach will encounter.

Let's take a couple of examples of How Jesus involved those whom He was teaching or to whom He was preaching. When the rich young man came to Jesus (Mat. 19:3) asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus did not just answer his question, He involved this young man in a discussion of the Law, its requirements, etc. Not only did he involve the young man in a discussion, but he used him as an example to teach the disciples and others about the danger of riches or the probabilities of the rich who have their heart set on riches entering into the Kingdom of Heaven. Another time in the temple, when the priests and the elders challenged His authority Jesus again did not offer a direct answer to their question. With the parable of the two sons, Jesus involved the people in the consideration of the matter of repentance and doing the will of the heavenly father. Though the priests and the elders answered correctly, they evidently didn't get the point, not because the form was not effective, but because of the hardness of their heart. But Jesus made His point (Matt 21:31_ "I tell you the truth, tax collectors and prostitutes are going into God's Kingdom ahead of you. John came to you in a righteous way, but you didn't believe him, the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. But even when you had seen that, *you didn't change your minds and believe him.*"

This method of give and take might be considered as a means to employ, to be effective or more effective in our preaching. It might be that this would fit the needs and the circumstances under which we are working. We of course are not interested in seeking new or different forms for the form's sake. our first consideration should be to use the means, the methods, the forms that serve most effectively for sharing the Gospel of the Lord Jesus with the people among whom we are working, no matter what their culture may be.

In His encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well we can see something else of Jesus' method of preaching the truth. Here He was dealing, at least to a certain extent, across

cultural lines. She was a Samaritan and He a Jew even though she was waiting for the Messiah. On the religious plane there was a point of contact, but not otherwise. Jesus' purpose in dealing with this woman was to lead her to the truth that He was the Christ for whom she was waiting. First of all he shows her that the supposed differences between the Jews and Samaritans really meant nothing. He gave proof. He asked her a woman for a drink and was ready to drink from her water pot. When it is necessary to cross cultural lines, we should try our best to break down any barriers which exist in reality, in the mind of our hearers or in our own in order that we do not distract from our real purpose or prevent our message from being received and accepted. Jesus then touched on something familiar and from there carried her on to something that she did not know, the revelation that He was the Messiah and that he had rich blessings to offer her. The promise of living water and His revelation of her past life convinced her that He was offering her something that she desired and that He was able to provide it. So much was she convinced that she went and told the people of her town that she had found the Christ. Isn't this the kind of preaching that we seek to do? The kind that convinces the hearer and makes them both believer and active witness.

Jesus also took advantage of local customs, even those which were not good. The lack of communication between the Jews and the Samaritans was used to open the way for the important revelation that He was the Christ of God. We should always be on the alert to use everything possible to open the way for an effective and fruitful presentation of the Word which has been entrusted to us.

The Activities of the Apostles

If it had been possible for us to go along with the apostles as they made their way from city to city with the precious Gospel, and if we had been able to observe their day by day activities, likely there would be much that we would have learned from them about the way that the Word can be brought to bear upon people of other cultures. A consideration of a couple of events that took place in their ministry hopefully will serve to give us some insight into the manner that they operated and some help for our activities and work.

In Acts 10 we have a report of Peter's preaching in the house of the centurion called Cornelius. He was a heathen by birth as his latin name indicates. He was a Roman official, a centurion in charge of the 10th part of a legion and was responsible for the Italian Band, a volunteer unit composed of Roman citizens which was active in several of the eastern provinces. It was to this Roman soldier and select certain members of his household that Peter spoke, having been directed to them by the Holy Spirit.

At the very onset, Peter makes it plain that he was not there on his own account or for his own gain. He showed that the customs prevailing would have prevented him from coming just as much as under normal circumstances a Jew would not have spoken to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Peter indicates clearly that his being with these people is the Lord's doing. The Lord instructed Cornelius to send for Peter and prepared Peter so that he was ready to go. In dealing with people of other cultures, a culture different from our own, we should be especially clear in indicating that we have not come on our own account, that we are not there for personal gain. Peter would not let Cornelius worship him. Neither did Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14) let the people in Lystra worship them and bring sacrifices to them when they thought that they were gods who had come to earth. We should make it very clear to the people whom we serve that we are not there because of some synodical resolution, or a part of the development of a master plan for missions of the W.E.L.S. We should be clear in indicating that we are there because the Lord

has sent us, and He has sent us because He would have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

Peter built on this natural opener declaring that God is no respecter of persons, and the Gospel message is not an exclusive one, meant only for the Children of Israel. The Gospel is exclusive only in the sense that this is the only way to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ the Savior. There is no doubt that the way in which Peter proceeded was effective, though we recognize that neither his success nor ours depends upon proper procedure. Perhaps it would be better to say that Peter did not hinder the Holy Spirit. While he was yet speaking the Holy Spirit came upon them that heard in such a way that the Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter were greatly surprised. What a blessing and impetus for our work if we would see such an abundance of the outpouring of the Lord's blessing on our labors. This is not an empty dream or a vain hope. Though we are not Peter, we have the same Word, we have the same promise that the Lord will go with us and be with us even to the end of the earth. Surely we should seek ways of bringing His word effectively to all people. Let us notice also how Peter presented Christ to his hearers. God sent His Word (the eternal being)...God anointed Jesus from Nazareth with the Holy Spirit (the historical person)...God appointed *Him* to judge the living and the dead (a contemporary power). This kind of presentation of Christ should work mightily in our hearers so that they believe and believing they have everlasting life.

Another incident from the ministry of the apostles which deserves our attention is Paul's preaching on Mar's Hill (Acts 17). Here we have an encounter with people of a different culture. Not only were they gentiles, but they were heathen, given to the worship of false gods, so much that Paul was stirred up inwardly by the profusion of altars and idols that he found. What did Paul do under these circumstances? Did he give up because he felt outnumbered? Not at all. He boldly approached those people and preached about the Lord Jesus and His resurrection from the dead--first to the Jews and then to whomever happened to be there. Then came his opportunity to speak to the learned men about what he considered to be the one thing needful and they considered to be a foreign god. The conditions here were different from those just considered with Peter in the house of Cornelius. Though they were Romans they were believers, religious people who loved God. In Athens the people were given over to the services of false gods. But note the plan of action that Paul followed. He began with the people where they were and not where he thought they should be. Paul intended to bring them to where they should have been by means of the message he preached or proclaimed. It isn't that he accommodated himself to their way of thinking, that he was seeking to present another god to them. What is his god, or one that would make the blessings that they were seeking more certain, or of a better kind. He preached the unknown God to them; the God unknown to them but known to him and the God whom they too would know. He boldly and clearly declared that this is the God who made the heaven and earth and who wants us to be His children. He calls us to repentance to escape the judgement by the Lord Jesus.

When Paul began to speak of the Resurrection, they cut him off. Whether he has opportunity to speak again of just how much success he had there we don't know. But all was not in vain. He didn't win them all, but "some men joined him and believed, among them were Dionysis, a member of the court, and a woman named Damaris, and some others with them." If he had other opportunities to speak he would have laid a good foundation for sermons to follow. In our mission fields where the true God is not known and considered a "foreign god" we perhaps will have to place more emphasis on preparatory preaching and sermons that lay the groundwork more fully. To bring the Gospel in limited doses leading the people slowly but

surely to the wonderful knowledge and conviction that Jesus is Savior and God and that there is forgiveness and everlasting life in His Name.

Certain other observations can be made from the activities of our Lord and His apostles, if not in respect to the formal side of preaching. We note the *clarity* of their message and preaching, they weren't trying to impress the people with high sounding words, they were trying to impress them with just one thing, the gospel that had been given them to preach. Though the disciples preached on the Sabbath day in the synagogues in the different cities where they went, they did not limit their preaching to one day of the week or to the formal place of worship. They preached daily in many places surely indicating that their preaching was not always a formal presentation of a formal preparation as we generally think of when we think about sermons. Much of their preaching was simply speaking from the heart aimed at the hearts of their hearers. Just how long the sermons were, we don't know, but likely they didn't consider 20 or 25 minutes the limit if conditions permitted or required more. In some cases like Paul on Mars Hill they were cut off. Other times there must have been time and opportunity for longer discourses. At Troas Paul preached on and on until midnight because he intended to leave the next day.

In spite of what we have observed, I don't think we have come up with the one correct or right form for our sermons. Because of differing circumstances and needs. There isn't one best or proper form. Even if there were on perfect form, likely it would not suit all circumstances, to say nothing of fitting every preacher. To select the best form, or an effective one, many things must be considered. We must consider *ourselves*, our *people*, the *conditions* under which we are to preach and that part of God's Truth that we want to share with our hearers. What is good and helpful within this framework should determine what form our sermons and preaching should take. A fuller study of the Lord's ministry and that of the apostles would likely give us more hints and helps. In the latest edition of the *Quarterly*, Prof. Jeske presents an article on the formal aspect of preaching which we would recommend to all for some help no matter what the culture is in which we are working. A story perhaps will sum this matter up. No matter what the form our preaching takes, the purpose is to get the message through. It is said that on a certain occasion King George V of England was to speak on the radio at the opening of an important British Congress, and his words were being relayed to America. Just as the broadcast was about to begin, a vital electronic cable suddenly snapped in a New York radio station, plunging the staff into panic. More than a million listeners in the United States had tuned in and were waiting for the King's voice. But it could not get through. The live link was severed and transmission impossible. To repair the breakdown would have taken at least twenty minutes and by that time the speech would have ended. Harold Vivien, a junior mechanic saw in a moment how the problem might be solved. Seizing the ends of the broken wire, he held them grimly and gallantly, as the current conveying the royal message was transmitted. Electrical charges of some two hundred and fifty volts shook his body, convulsing him from head to foot and causing him considerable pain. But he did not relax his grip. Resolutely, desperately, he clung to the cable till the people heard the king. What a picture of the preacher in action (preaching) gripping God on the one hand and the people on the other, and letting the living Word though You will never preach as you ought to preach until you preach like that—in touch alike with Christ and with the people to whom you preach and conveying by whatever form you deem best, the voice and truth of the eternal King.