

The Power of Analytical Preaching

By Irwin J. Habeck

Thanks to the influence of Professor William Henkel, when we left the Seminary we were sold on the importance of analytical preaching. In our youthful enthusiasm and idealism we were sure that if we employed that method of sermonizing everyone who heard our sermons would see at once how superior our method of sermonizing was. It came as a rude shock on one occasion to hear a layman assert that in his opinion graduates of another seminary were better preachers than the graduates of ours. That made me wonder what they had that we did not have. I studied the homiletical materials which they used and observed those preachers from another school whenever the opportunity presented itself. I noticed that they used more oratorical flourishes than we, employed a more flowery language and introduced many anecdotes. It was a real eye opener for me when a good friend from the other side in all sincerity informed me that he had written what he considered a good sermon and asked me to suggest a text for it. His sermon had not grown out of a text but was a compilation of pious thoughts based upon a variety of portions of Scripture. Since the Word was still being employed, the Spirit could still effect his purposes through that sermon. But I wanted none of that kind of use of a text nor of that kind of sermon and instead became more than ever an apologist for analytical preaching.

My preference for analytical preaching has not diminished over the years. It is based upon the conviction that there is unique power in analytical preaching. This power is brought to bear upon the preacher—if his approach is right. He will not experience it if he gets at the task of writing a sermon by saying, “Sunday is coming. I’ve got to knock out a sermon. Let’s see what help I can find in this text.” We never want to use the Bible just as a tool. It is always God’s Word in which he speaks to me. So our first question when we approach a text is, “What has my God to say to me here?”

To discover the answer to that question will require probing and reflection. We shall need to understand the language and grammar of the text. Then we shall need to reflect, to meditate, yes, to pray for enlightenment. More than one student has admitted that when he first saw his assigned text, he wondered whether it contained enough material for a sermon. After he had begun to mine the text, however, he began to wonder how he could put all of the thoughts which it suggested into one sermon. This presupposes, of course, that such texts must be chosen which contain an adequate number of preaching values. But if a text meets this requirement and the preacher lets his Lord speak to him through it, he will discover that it leads to a variety of reactions: sense of guilt because of a particular sin, awareness of sinfulness in general, assurance of forgiveness, confidence in the Lord’s wise providence, hope, the firm resolve to break with sin in general or a particular sin and, on the other hand, to practice a certain virtue or to lead a God-pleasing life in general. When any such facet is experienced when studying a text, there will be the joy of discovery. Not everything will come at the same time. Some reactions are immediate, others come as one continues to hover over a text. But each new reaction is connected with the joy of discovery, especially if it has never been called forth by the text before.

One feature of such joy will be enthusiasm. Students show it when they reach the point where they say, “I like my text.” Now the labor of putting a sermon together is lightened. At this point we are ready to say, “I’ve found something grand in this text and now I want to share it.” When such enthusiasm carries over into the delivery of the sermon, the hearers too will experience the joy of discovery, for enthusiasm is contagious. All of this may seem to be more a matter of speaking about the power of the Word than about the power of analytical preaching. But the two are inseparable, for analytical preaching starts with a study of the Word. In such study the Word exerts its power upon the preacher.

But also upon the hearer. We have already hinted at that when we said that enthusiasm for a text is contagious. Let us look at the hearer. He hears a text read. That for him is a promise that the sermon is going to help him understand that portion of God’s Word just a little bit better than before. The use of the analytical method will keep that promise. Furthermore, if there is something in the text the meaning of which was not immediately obvious to the hearer when the text was read and the preacher then clearly explains it, the hearer will be pleased. As a believer he loves the Word and therefore wants to be sure to understand what it says. So

analytical preaching makes the believer happy and thereby increases his love for the Word and his gratitude to the God who gave us his Word. That is one facet of the power in analytical preaching.

Clear exposition of the text is basic to analytical preaching. But having learned what the Lord is saying in the portion of his Word which serves as the text, the preacher will next want to discover what the truth which has been expounded means for the faith and Christian life of his people. If the preacher started his sermon work with a devotional approach to his text, he will already have discovered what it means for his faith and life. Since his hearers are made of the same stuff as he, what holds true for him will hold true for them also. But the parallel will not be exact. His hearers live in a different environment; they encounter questions and problems to which he may not be exposed. So the preacher needs to learn to know his people where they are in order to determine what they need and then see whether there is something in his text which addresses itself to one of their needs. The application dare not be forced but evident. If the exposition is clear, the hearer will be happy to agree, to say A. If the application clearly flows from the text, he will accept it by being ready to say B. That too is part of the power of analytical preaching.

In this process the person of the preacher recedes into the background. The focus is upon the Word. The preacher is not out to attract attention to himself by the use of clever or flowery language or by his oratorical skill or by his use of interesting anecdotes. He is intent upon imparting the Word and his hearers upon understanding the Word and seeing what it says to feed their faith and direct their lives.

And that is what it is all about. When the Word stands out in both exposition and application, its power will assert itself. In his preaching Paul eschewed any device which might have diverted attention from what he said to how he said it. "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on man's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor 2:4,5). We are familiar with his ascription of power to the gospel: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Ro 1:16). A literal translation of 2 Timothy 3:15 emphasizes the power of the Word, saying of the Holy Scriptures that "they *have the power* to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." The Word has power to work and strengthen faith and to direct and motivate Christian living. Analytical preaching keeps the Word in the foreground. Hence there is power in analytical preaching.

What is a pastor to do if he becomes the successor of a man who used a method of sermonizing other than the analytical method? No better advice can be given than the familiar "to thine own self be true." The initial reaction of his hearers may be similar to the one referred to in the opening paragraph of this article. This calls for patience on the part of the preacher. At the outset he will need to give his people milk until they have become accustomed to his method. But it will grow on them. Among the members of one of my former congregations was a man who, although he was quite regular in church attendance, was not too profound spiritually. On one occasion he told me that my sermons were much better than they used to be. I hope that the observation was deserved. But I suspect that what he was really saying was that he had become accustomed to analytical preaching and found it to be edifying. Regardless of what the preferences of people may be, the preacher who uses the analytical method may be confident that if he has presented the Word, his hearers will not be going home from church without having been fed.

Analytical preaching is based upon thorough exegesis of a text. But the preacher will have to be careful not to let too much of his scholarly research be advertised in his sermon. Where there are exegetical problems, the preacher will have to wrestle with them until he arrives at an interpretation which in his conviction does full justice to the text, the context and the rest of Scripture. But it would be boring and confusing for his hearers if he were to inform them of the problems he had to solve in order to arrive at the interpretation which he is presenting. He will present results but not the process which led to them. He will step up as the Lord's spokesman who says, "Thus saith the Lord." His purpose is not to show people what a clever exegete he is.

While thorough scholarly exegesis will be involved in the preparation of the sermon, the sermon itself ought to be popular, reaching people at their level. One could expect that this quality would have to be there if the preparation of the sermon leads to the joy of discovery and enthusiasm at the prospect of being permitted to share with God's people that which has been discovered. But the use of difficult language or abstract

terminology could defeat this purpose. Hence the preacher needs to use language which his average hearer can easily understand. He will need to be concrete. The judicious use of figures of speech will help accomplish that purpose—pictures make meanings clear. In primitive languages almost every word has a root which refers to something concrete. Translators are often hard put to translate our abstract terms into such languages. Close attention to the pictures in the root of the terms in his text will often provide the preacher with a clue for keeping his pulpit language concrete. Pertinent illustrations are only an expansion of this principle. An occasional well-chosen anecdote is also an extension of the process. Since anecdotes are interesting, the preacher needs to exercise caution in using them lest people remember the anecdote and not the text. That would emasculate the power of analytical preaching.

The joy of discovery and enthusiasm because of the privilege of being permitted to share what has been discovered ought to dominate the delivery of the sermon. There may have been careful text study and good grammatical and literary style in writing the sermon, but if it is delivered in a drab and lifeless manner, a barrier has been interposed to thwart the power in analytical preaching. Therefore the preacher dare not let his physical condition or stage fright or disappointment over a meager attendance stifle the joy and enthusiasm about which we have written. The joy and enthusiasm are not to be affected or artificial but rather the effect of the powerful Word.

Not all of use have the same gifts. Not all men are endowed to be brilliant preachers. The Lord expects no more of us than that we be faithful. Analytical preaching is not the only way to be faithful in our preaching ministry, but it is a good way, not too difficult for the less gifted and not beneath the dignity of the richly endowed. Therefore we recommend it. It expounds and applies the Word. There is power in the Word. Therefore there is power in analytical preaching.