

Preaching as Evangelism

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What does the phrase “preaching as evangelism” mean?

This is an ambiguous phrase: “preaching as evangelism.” The term “evangelism” can mean any proclamation of the gospel. However, let us assume that here the term is used in its more common understanding of proclaiming the gospel to those who do not believe. The term “preaching” could also mean any proclamation of the gospel. But let us here assume that by preaching we use the more common understanding of the proclamation of the gospel in the gathered community of believers. Obviously, there is preaching outside of the church, in contexts where faith is neither expected nor taken for granted. If the wider use of both terms is implied in the phrase “preaching as evangelism,” then there is no issue at all: all preaching could be evangelism. But when we speak of preaching in the context of Sunday worship, preaching in the church, in what sense should this preaching be considered evangelism, that is to say, preaching to those who do not believe? There are at least four ways in which this might be understood.

First, though the congregation gathers because they believe they are Christians, the pastor does not believe this about them, and therefore treats them as nonbelievers in need of evangelization. This is obviously a very negative way of stating the matter. It is rather like John the Baptist telling Jews they needed to be baptized as though they were converts. Such a direct approach would hardly work week after week, however, nor might we expect a congregation to return time and time again only to be told they have made no progress but have to start over.

At the same time, there is the reality that where Christianity is very much a part of the culture, people go to church as much out of habit as out of conviction. It is simply the thing good people do. Søren Kierkegaard once wrote that the most difficult task was to deal with people who were under the illusion that they were Christians. He wrote:

A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him. There is nothing that requires such gentle handling as an illusion, if one wishes to dispel it. . . . It means that one does not begin *directly* with the matter one wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man’s illusion as good money. So . . . one does not begin thus: I am a Christian; you are not a Christian.¹

Evangelistic preaching to such a congregation would therefore need to be quite indirect. It would have to at least give the congregation the impression that the preacher does believe they are Christians. This leads us to our second possible meaning of the phrase.

Though both the preacher and the congregation acknowledge that they are the church, that they rightly bear the name of Christian, they have, in the words to the church in Ephesus, “fallen away from their first love” (Revelation 2:4) and need to be

recalled to their vocation as Christians. This is really revival. Every congregation needs this—though not every Sunday—and such times are actually built into the church year. Granted, many congregations and preachers do not take this seriously, and the opportunity for revival is passed by as unnecessary. Services for the renewal of baptismal vows are such occasions. The entirety of Lent leads itself to this.

The third possibility is that the preacher is truly preaching to the unconverted—guests brought by members, children of believers brought to church by their parents. This means, however, that the majority of the congregation is hearing words addressed to someone else. In fact, this can happen often when the preacher thinks he or she is preaching to the members of the congregation who need revival, but those members assume the sermon is directed at others.

The fourth possibility is that the preacher is demonstrating what evangelism looks like in the hope that members will take seriously their own task of evangelism outside of the service of worship. This is probably the least likely meaning of the phrase, and it is probably also one of the most important needs in most congregations.

For Eastern Orthodox Christians, the words “preaching as evangelism” would have a totally different meaning, since worship is assumed to be a form of proclamation to the principalities and powers, unseen observers of the worship of the church. Preaching, and indeed the entire worship service, has the power to cause the powers of evil to retreat and the powers of good to become stronger in our world, even if the human agents of such powers are not present. This is probably what Paul means when he writes to the Corinthians that whenever they celebrate the Lord’s Supper “they proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). The proclamation is not simply to the congregational members in attendance, but also to the “principalities and powers” that are also witnesses.

What should the phrase mean in our context?

Of the first three, more typical understandings, each has serious drawbacks. There is an added problem that lies at the heart of the issue, however. Precisely because of the revival format within which the modern Evangelical movement had its rise, the term evangelism often has a strongly individualistic note to it. That is to say, preaching has the intent of leading individuals to make a decision, a commitment to the gospel message. They are called, individually and personally, to become believers. This is important in a revival service, aimed at bringing people who have not been believers or those who have fallen away from their faith to become Christians for the first time or to renew their faith in Christ. When the original revivals took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they had roots in a culture in which it could be assumed that everyone at least knew what the message of the church was. It was clearly a revival, not a proclamation of the gospel to those who did not know it.

However, when this evangelistic form is taken into the church itself as a dominant form of preaching, it means that the sermon is directed at individuals, and not at their life together as the church. And yet, the Bible itself as written in large part not for individuals but for the communities of those who are the People of God. It is written to God’s People and comes out of the experience of those communities, showing where they have been faithful and where they have not. It is this ancient word to God’s People that the preacher is called upon to proclaim in our own day. To make it a call only to separate individuals rather than to the congregation as a whole is to do some

harm to the character of the text itself.

The gospel is not only a word of salvation to individuals: it is also the creation of a new people. In a way, to proclaim only the cost of salvation—the cross—and omit the emergence of the new creation is to omit the power of the resurrection and leave the message on Good Friday. That is to say, though the price of our salvation is the cross of Christ, the victory proclaimed by Easter is that the new creation, the firstfruits of the Kingdom of God, has entered into our world. This is experienced in the church: the body of Christ, gathered by the power of the Holy Spirit. To concentrate only on personal salvation without an equal stress on the community of faith is to truncate the gospel itself.

This problem is abetted by the changes in the English language itself. We no longer make any distinction between the second person singular and the second person plural. For both we say “you.” At least in the time of the King James translation, the difference was clear: “thee” and “ye.” But now, when we hear “you” we often assume it means me individually, whereas many times—if not most—the Scripture intends it to be a plural “you,” meaning the whole community gathered to hear the Word. In addition, because of the printing press and the ability to have personal Bibles, we often read Scripture alone, privately, and even more likely assume it is addressed to us as a solitary individual. Of course we should read Scripture by ourselves, but we still need to understand that it is really addressed to us as part of a community, part of the People of God. When it was written, and for centuries thereafter, Christians only heard Scripture in the midst of the gathered community, and more likely understood it as applying to them as a group.

If we read Scripture in this sense—as addressed to the community of faith—then it is challenging all of us, all the baptized, to become the community we are called to be. It is therefore not a matter of deciding if each individual member is truly a Christian but whether the whole gathering is what it should be. There is always room for growth, always a clearer way to be a witness to the world around us of the kind of life God intends for human communities to live. If preaching as evangelism means calling the congregation to remember what it is—the body of Christ—then that is an appropriate task for every sermon. It is reminding the congregation of the meaning of the sign they bear because of their baptism.

If there are those present who are not believers, at least they will understand what the church is and what Christians are about when they gather. It might be exciting enough that they would like to become part of such a people. Part of what the church is called to do is to proclaim the gospel to the world outside the church, both in deed and in word. Therefore, such preaching could also help the faithful in their own evangelistic task.

If the preacher uses the lectionary, then the readings will look different if they are studied with the congregation rather than individuals in mind.

Some Lectionary Passages for the Season after Pentecost

We will look at the pericopes suggested for two of the Sundays in the period of Ordinary Time following Pentecost in Cycle C, propers 11 and 14, for Sundays between July 17 and 23 and August 7 and 13.

In the passages for proper 11, one of the suggestions for the Old Testament lesson is Amos 8:1-12. It is a prophecy about the coming destruction of Israel because of its

unethical ways, and in spite of its “proper” worship. In other words, the people gather and go through the motions of worship but they never really hear what God’s word says to them. The prophecy includes a future famine for God’s word, precisely when the people begin to hunger for it because they have reached a time of utter despair. The message is clear for a congregation: if the people do not cherish the Word of God while it is in their midst, then it will be gone when they finally are ready to hear it. Just attending worship is not enough.

The Gospel lesson is Luke 10:38-42, the story of Jesus’ visit in the home of Mary and Martha. The same point is made: Mary realizes that the Word of God is in the living room and she therefore stays there to hear it. Martha is in the kitchen, going about her usual tasks. Jesus clearly commends Mary as having chosen the better part.

The Epistle lesson is Colossians 1:15-28, a description of Christ as the firstborn of all creation, and Paul’s own work in preaching the gospel. Here Paul addresses the church directly, writing, “And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith.” These words could easily be understood as referring to individual Christians, and yet in the text they are clearly referring to the church. Their holiness is corporate: it has to do with how they behave toward each other, and not only with their personal holiness. The reconciliation Christ has provided has linked them to each other, and not only to Jesus.

The Amos passage is also clearly addressed to the community of faith, and it is even more poignant because it includes comments about their gathering for worship. Their behavior toward each other has been unethical. They are not the holy community, the witness to the world of God’s intentions for humanity, that they were created to be. It is their common life that is the cause of their condemnation.

The Mary and Martha passage could also be viewed individually, and justifiably so, since the words of Jesus address two individuals. But when it is read alongside the Amos passage, the word to the whole congregation becomes more obvious. This passage has had an interesting history. For centuries it was read in the service of veiling for a nun—when she took her final vows. In that context it affirmed her choice of the monastic life over against the choice of those women, who, like Martha, took care of the home. Obviously, Protestants did not care for such an interpretation. For them, the cloistered life was not higher than the life of marriage and family. So the passage was interpreted to mean that both the life of Bible study and the life of service in the community were equally valuable. Many congregations had women’s groups that were divided between “Mary circles” and “Martha circles.” The first spent their time in Bible study and the second in rolling bandages or collecting clothing for the poor. The stress was on the equal validity of both groups. The problem is that Jesus does say that Mary chose the better part! The Amos passage read alongside this Gospel lesson makes it easier to see that Martha was reproved, not because she was doing something wrong, but because when the Word of God is present, the faithful are called to listen to it. If Jesus is teaching in the living room, then the kitchen is not the place to be, even though when he is not teaching, Mary too should be about serving the physical needs of Jesus and others.

The Gospel lesson for the fourteenth proper is also in Luke, chapter 12, verses 32-40. Since it begins with the words, “Do not be afraid, little flock...,” it can hardly be

understood as addressed to only one person. The little flock is to continue together, faithfully carrying out the Master's commands, until he returns. It is paired with the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 1:1 and 1:10-20, where the prophet, speaking for God, is condemning the people who gather for worship but then live faithlessly. They fail to live together as God's people, so that the poor suffer injustice and the widow and the orphan have no one to defend them. The Epistle lesson is from Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, and recalls those who lived faithfully. Their faith was seen in their living by hope, living out of the future that God had promised them. This is what the people in Isaiah's time failed to do and it is what the Gospel lesson calls Christians to do. They are to live now by the ethics and mores of the Kingdom that is promised, whose down payment or earnest money was seen in the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Living by such faith is not easy. Luke records words of Jesus to his "little flock" to sell what they have and give to the poor. Such generosity is only possible when one trusts the community. Luke's second book—Acts—tells of the early Christian community in Jerusalem that did live in this manner. It was not a matter of giving up everything all at once and becoming destitute. Rather it was a radical sharing, so that those who had resources gave to those in need. They did not call anything their own, but whatever they had was used for the whole community where it was needed.

Our congregations are not like that. We may assume that since those early Christians expected the full dawning of the Kingdom in the very near future, they could risk such behavior. But the pattern persisted even when such an expectation was gone. Our communities are different. Our economic system is different. But we also live in a society that assumes economic success and failure are personal matters and have nothing to do with church life. If some people lose their jobs, other members of the congregation have no obligation to help them. If a member gets into financial difficulty, chances are they will hide it from other church members. A congregation may help the needy outside its own membership but assume that members are on their own. Somehow, neediness is not proper for church members! There is something wrong with this picture.

The church is called to be a community—a loving, generous community. Its love is to overflow its own life and go into the world around the church. However, if this love and generosity are shown only to those outside, if there is little sense that the congregation's own life is its greatest witness to the world around it, then much of the Bible will be incomprehensible, because it is written to communities of faith and deals with their life together. Granted, in our culture it is difficult to overcome the entrenched individualism. But an understanding that preaching seeks to show the congregation the significance of its life together as an evangelistic form to the wider society is surely a beginning.

Note

1. Kierkegaard, *The Point of View Etc.*: including *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, *Two Notes About the 'Individual'* and *On My Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 25, 40-41.