Homiletics

Constructing a Contextual Sermon

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Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?
- Matthew 24:45

Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."
- Matthew 13:52

… and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.
- 1 Corinthians 9:20-22

What is homiletics?

Homiletics (from the Geek , “assembled crowd”), forms part of practical theology, and refers to the study of preparing and delivering sermons. One who practices or studies homiletics may be called a , or more colloquially a .

Chapter 1
The Challenge of Preaching

1.1 Main Challenge: A Disconnect in Meaning

To be a deacon or priestly minister, and to preach the word of God, is a huge privilege and honour. It is to be a tool in the hands of God, to exhort, to teach, to correct, and as those ordained by the Apostle ministry, to impart divine life. Needless to say, with it comes a great sense of responsibility, and also, many challenges.

Preaching, currently, is in a state of crisis. This is not something that just affects the New Apostolic Church, but most established denominations are struggling with this issue. All preachers face the same challenges. The general tendency seems to be that those listening to sermons appear more and more to live in two worlds: the world of everyday life, and on Sundays, the world of the church. Especially in Western Christendom, there is an increasing disconnect between the two, a disconnect between the meaning experienced in everyday life, and the meaning communicated from the pulpit or altar.

The meaning people experience in their daily lives (e.g. topics on social media, news, political currents, building a career, rapidly advancing technology, scientific discovery, consumerism, the explosion and proliferation of knowledge, a sense of isolation, relationship problems, multiple and confusing truth claims, unemployment and poverty, etc.) is so different to the meaning communicated through preaching.

Research indicates that more and more people feel that the word being preached is irrelevant to their daily lives. Some can live with it and come to church out of faithfulness, or out of a need for spiritual solace. Others find the sermon to be irrelevant, and attend fewer and fewer services, or stop attending altogether.

It is not as if preaching has become redundant and unnecessary for most people. The publication of books on preaching is a growing industry. Tele-evangelists draw thousands, if not millions of viewers

every week. Local "prophets" pack halls and churches. In popular culture "preaching" also occurs. There are many popular authors and public speakers who have a faithful following on television, podcasts, Youtube videos, DVD's, or published books.

People to listen. They guidance. They to discover meaning in their lives. Who do our members listen to? From whom do they get guidance? Who or what gives them meaning? Today, the church is but one of many possible sources, and no longer can we automatically assume that it is recognised as a place of authority like in the past. Is our preaching compelling and relevant for people to find meaning within the church? For ministers of the Word these inherent human needs gives the opportunity for the "world of meaning" of the Gospel to interact with the "world of meaning" of our members. We need to reflect and understand, however, why this interaction does not always take place.

1.2 Other Challenges

Here we will list other challenges that contribute to the contemporary crisis in preaching, and once again, these problems are universal and cut across denominational boundaries.

1.2.1 The Demands on Preachers – No Demands on the Congregation

First, preachers are expected to "perform", week in and week out. Members come expectantly and the minister must deliver the Word of God. They bare their souls, in full view of the congregations' demands and evaluation. This is a demand and expectation that does not go away. There is a constant pressure to have something meaningful to say.

Second, preaching is often seen as the exclusive responsibility of ordained ministers. Preachers preach. The congregation listens. The preacher is active. The congregation is passive, and has nothing to contribute. Most Christians understand that they have no active role to play in a sermon.

Third, there is a fear of preaching. This could be due to personality traits (many ministers are "introverts"), a lack of confidence, or the fear of preaching at a disinterested or unresponsive congregation. This leads to paralysis, and delaying preparation to a last minute scramble to put a few thoughts together.

Fourth, a lack of feedback from the congregation. Ministers/preachers are generally scared of criticism. This, however, stands in the way of determining whether preaching is effective, relevant or outmoded.

1.2.2 Sermon Structure and Content

Research shows that the following are the most common complaints from congregants:

First, the sermon has too many ideas. Members cannot connect the various points being made and so lose interest and disengage from the sermon. What is needed are simple sermons that teach deep truths. Quite often people enjoy a Sunday School service because it is communicated in a simple way.

Second, sermons give too much analyses and too few answers. So much is said on what is wrong, and what people should do ("moralising"), but little to nothing is said on people should do things.

Third, preaching is often defensive. Preachers need to defend God or the church. There is a lack of persuasion in preaching. Instead of being defensive, the sermon should be seen as the powerful and transformative presence of God in people's lives.

Fourth, sermons are too formal and impersonal. There is no sense of urgency, conviction, or passion. There is no "good news" (= Gospel) that inspires and compels people to (re)commit their lives to the Gospel, just words.

Fifth, too many sermons reach a dead end. There is no clear purpose or goal of the sermon. After the sermon people say: "So what?" There is no guidance to the commitment and action necessary from members.

1.2.3 Doctrinal and Biblical Illiteracy

First, most Christians today have a very poor knowledge and understanding of the Bible. Preachers can no longer assume congregants know the story of Abraham, Moses, or Paul, or the history of the Old Testament people of God, or any other Biblical topics.

Second, preachers can no longer assume that the congregation has an understanding of theological topics. We are facing the reality of an increasingly secularised or untrained laity. Words like "triune God", "salvation", "judgement", "word", "gospel", "kingdom of God", "ascension", "creation", etc., cannot be used without explaining their theological meaning and significance and how they relate to the meaning people experience in their everyday lives.

1.2.4 Sermon Delivery

First, the preacher is separated from the congregation. The preacher is "up there" on the pulpit (or altar), and the congregation "down there". There is a disconnect, not only in terms of an exchange in meaning, but also distance.

Second, the sermon is a monologue. The preachers speaks, the congregation listens. The preacher is active, and the congregation passive. Some prefer it this way, while the younger generation wants to be more involved, ask questions, and give feedback.

1.3 Challenges from a New Apostolic Perspective

The problems mentioned above are in various ways also relevant to us. They are compounded by the fact that our members are served by lay ministers. In addition to the expectation of being effective preachers, they must also build their careers (or find employment!), and be responsible and loving husbands and fathers. A lack of theological training can also lead to a lack of depth in understanding and preaching. The demands of church, family, and career, also makes it difficult for learning or skills development, not to mention coping with all the pressures of life and making time to prepare for a sermon.

Ministers are to take note of the new resolution by the District Apostle Meeting Vienna, June 2017:

> **Officiating divine services**
>
> Divine services will no longer automatically be officiated by the highest ranking minister or by the rector. The local circumstances are to be taken into account. Individual issues are to be regulated by the District Apostle for his working area.

One of the reasons for this resolution is given as follows: "It takes time and effort to prepare for a divine service properly. A balanced scheduling of officiants can help protect the brothers from being overburdened, and help them balance their family and professional life with their ministry."

4, 2017, pp. 15, 16

As a church, we recognise the challenges that our ministers face. We appreciate the fact that they serve as lay ministers, and sacrifice their time and energy in service of the Lord's work. We also recognise that we have a responsibility to equip our ministers with knowledge and skills. This course attempts to do just that, to enhance the purpose and effectiveness of preaching by giving you skills on **how to prepare a sermon**. This is part of homiletics, "the study of preparing and delivering sermons". Our focus here, however, is not on delivery, but exclusively on sermon preparation.

This course may appear daunting at first, but with time and experience it will become easier to apply the principles, and easier to construct an effective sermon. As servants of the Word, we are also in a privileged position to constantly grow in faith and understanding by preparing sermons. The benefits of being a servant of the Word far outweigh the challenges.

Besides, we have a solid foundation to build on. Most ministers come from the contexts of the congregations within which they serve. Here we have a tremendous advantage to deliver relevant sermons, having first-hand experience of the contexts our members find themselves in.

In addition, we have been authorised by the Apostle ministry to do our task. We are called to align ourselves and to commit to the vision and mission of the church:

Vision Statement of the New Apostolic Church

A church in which people feel at home and, inspired by the Holy Spirit and their love for God, align their lives to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and thus prepare themselves for His return and eternal life.

Mission Statement of the New Apostolic Church

Reaching out to all people in order to teach them the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to baptize them with water and the Holy Spirit.

Providing soul care and cultivating a warm fellowship in which everyone shall experience the love of God and the joy of serving Him and others.

1.4 Time for Reflection

As a minister, we need to reflect on our capacity and role as preachers of the Word. Read the questions below and answer them as honestly as possible. The questions are not intended to "judge" or "criticise", or to make you feel "guilty" or "inadequate". Quite the contrary. It is to make you more aware of the current and universal challenges we face in preaching, and how it affects you personally, and to awake personal thoughts on where we need to go.

Reflect on:

1. How seriously do I take the responsibility that I have been authorised and mandated by the Apostle ministry to preach the Word of God?

2. Do I really want to improve the quality of my sermons and improve my skills?

3. Do I enjoy preparing for a sermon, or is it a struggle? Is preaching a privilege, or a burden?

4. Does my sermon and the message of the Gospel connect with the context ("world of meaning") of the members?

5. Do my sermons bring about positive change? Are members inspired, comforted, taught, or challenged?

6. Am I open to receive feedback or criticism from members/fellow ministers on my sermons?

7. Am I nervous, or confident when I preach?

8. When I prepare my sermons, do I always have a clear objective or goal with the sermon?

9. Do I read the Bible enough? Do I study the Catechism enough? Do I understand the New Apostolic doctrine (cf. 1 Timothy 4:16)?