

# Speaking about the Right Things the Right Way

## *probing reviews of five books in homiletics*

Greg Liston  
(until recently, Senior Pastor at Hillsborough Baptist, Auckland  
. now engaged in PhD study)

Every flaw in society can be traced to a failure of the church. Every failure of the church stems from an inadequacy in its leaders. Every inadequacy in a leader can be seen in their preaching. An exaggeration? Probably, but most would acknowledge a strong correlation between what we talk about, who we are and what difference we make. It may be true that one person living holy is better than fifty preaching holiness, but it is equally true that if no one preaches holiness very few will live it. So a key question is %Does our contemporary Kiwi preaching speak about the right things the right way?+

Each of the five books in this review, either explicitly or implicitly, answers this question with a resounding no. Pasquarello's *theological* analysis asserts our preaching has become too anthropocentric. Witten's *sociological* analysis claims our preaching has become too secularized. Quicke's *functional* analysis asserts we are too passive. Dunn-Wilson's *historical* analysis implies we have become too chronologically myopic. And finally, Wright's *methodological* analysis suggests our preaching is too accommodating. Through this discussion we critically engage with each book, asking how our %kiwimade+ preaching could become more God-honouring and effective.

### **The Theological Analysis**

Pasquarello III, Michael, *Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation*, Grand Rapids, BakerAcademic, 2006

What is preaching's purpose? According to Pasquarello, the wrong answer is to %change lives+. The right answer is to %worship God+. Most contemporary preaching has personal transformation as the end, God as the means, worship as the byproduct. Pasquarello's understanding of preaching has worship as the end, speech about God as the means, and personal transformation as the byproduct. A sermon %is judged according to the truthfulness of its subject and doxological intent: faithfulness in directing attention to the truth, beauty, and goodness of the Triune God of whom we speak.<sup>1</sup> Our preaching should not be defined by consumer desires . what works - but by Trinitarian theology . what is. %When homiletical style is determined by listener demand rather than the content and purpose of Scripture, the rhetoric of preaching is made extrinsic to the subject matter of preaching: God and his Word have been separated.<sup>2</sup>

Pasquarello is surely correct in maintaining that substantive theological engagement at all levels (head, heart, hands) is mandatory for God-honouring preaching. But human engagement is also important. How I wish my preaching was judged merely on my motivation (faithfulness), my content (truthfulness) and my manner (congruence). God may be the primary audience of my sermons, but he is not the only audience. I couldn't stare into the blank faces that would stare back if I was preaching Pasquarello's sermons, and still believe I was honouring God. Certainly the goal is God. But a sermon is a journey, and the journey must start where we are.<sup>3</sup> All too often (I admit

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<sup>1</sup> Pasquarello III, Michael, *Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation*, Grand Rapids, BakerAcademic, 2006 p215

<sup>2</sup> Pasquarello, p167

<sup>3</sup> Note that I am not saying here that humanity (and human needs in particular) determine the subject, purpose or point of the sermon. What I am saying is that in the actual event of preaching, we must begin where the congregation are. If the congregation already define themselves in God's story, then opening the text as a starting point makes a lot of sense. If (as is often the case) they are defined by a secular, anthropocentric story, then we must start there and move them onto God's story. If we don't start where they are, then they will

shamefully) my sermonic journeys terminated with only a slightly cleaned up humanity, and for this error Pasquarello's book offers a vital trajectory correction. But he goes too far. We must understand, identify and empathise with our congregations if we are ever to lead them to God. Pasquarello overemphasizes the end of the sermonic journey at the expense of acknowledging that we must start where we are.

### **The Sociological Analysis**

Witten, Marsha, G., *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993

Witten analysed forty-seven sermons about the Prodigal Son from large Presbyterian and Southern Baptist churches in North America. She found significant accommodation to secularism: God was less judgmental, the world was stripped of danger to the soul, sin was deflected onto outsiders or buried deep in therapeutic language, and religion was about self-enhancement. Three secular forces encouraged this departure from traditional Christian understanding: privatization (making Christianity primarily about me), rationalism (meaning Christianity must work for me) and pluralism (deriving Christianity's value in that it does work for me). Witten acknowledges some evidence of resistance to the forces of secularisation, but suggests reframing as a more valuable response. Reframing finds a balance between accommodation (truth is subjective) and resistance (truth is objective) by viewing religious truth as both objective and subjective - symbolic . an overarching narrative that provides significance and coherence to life.<sup>4</sup>

Garrett's review of Witten's work claims the thematic focus of this study has been skewed by the text selection.<sup>5</sup> He has a point. We should not be surprised that individual forgiveness is emphasized when each sermon's text is the Prodigal Son. And yet the themes Witten notes as predominantly absent . the transcendence of God, the danger of the world, the reality of sin, the purpose of religion . are also clearly evident in this parable. Indeed, God's extreme forgiveness makes little sense except in the context of his extreme holiness and our extreme depravity. No, Witten's analysis stands, and is scarily compelling.

So what would Witten make of contemporary Kiwi sermons? This question is worthy of deep reflection. Some of us are driven by a desire to honour the text. Stott is their inspiration. We proclaim the truth. Whether anybody hears us, though, is questionable. Others are driven by a desire to be heard. Hybels is their inspiration. But the desire for relevance can result in us succumbing to the pressures of secularization. We preach anthropocentric sermons that have little potential to generate Spirit-inspired transformation. And consequently, we become frustrated by how tangential Jesus is in our congregation's lives, with Christianity becoming just another discipline added to exercise and a balanced budget for maintaining a healthy and productive lifestyle. A third group are driven by a desire to define their lives in God. Their intent is to elevate and delight in the God the text points us to. Piper is their inspiration. Certainly this group are less accommodating to the pressures of secularization, but again much less heard. What a conundrum! How can you transform a congregation to live within God's story, when they cannot (or will not) hear sermons that don't fit their own secularized story? Witten neatly outlines the problem, but she provides no answers.

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never hear us, even if we speak of God. The sermon must have God as its goal, but it is we who are moving to God, and so we must start where we are.

<sup>4</sup> Witten, Marsha, G., *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993 p138

<sup>5</sup> Garrett, W. R., *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 no4 1994 p396

### **The Functional Analysis**

Quicke, Michael J., *360-Degree Leadership: Preaching to Transform Congregations*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006

Maybe the answer is in effective leadership? Leadership gets all the press these days. Pastors are perceived more as leaders than preachers, and most pastors' primary desire is to lead well. Quicke argues that pastors ignore their most effective leadership tool if they neglect preaching's transformational potential. Preaching and leadership belong together. The first half of Quicke's book contains the theological, scriptural and pragmatic reasons why this is so, the second half explains how preaching can contribute to each stage of the leadership journey.

Just because something is obvious doesn't mean it shouldn't be said. So, even though Quicke's thesis is quite obvious, it still deserves to be said. Perhaps it didn't need a whole book though! Its benefit exists not so much in the working out of the central thesis, but how the best of much other (leadership focused) writing is brought together. His distinction between thin-blooded and full-blooded (missional) preaching was particularly striking. In our preaching we should expect God to transform people's lives. We are to speak the truth about God, take people on a journey to God, and expect that God will act. The first we do mostly, the second we do sometimes, the third we do occasionally. This must change. But call it leadership or preaching, the problem remains. How do we gain a hearing for God's story in a secularized church culture? I have read many good books on leadership in the last few years. They make good sense, but the answers are not there. We must look elsewhere.

### **The Historical Analysis**

Dunn-Wilson, David, *A Mirror for the Church: Preaching in the First Five Centuries*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005

Perhaps the answer lies in the distant past? Dunn-Wilson's historical analysis of early Christian preaching is the first I have ever read. It won't be the last. Working through the first five centuries, he noted how the early preachers in the church altered their rhetorical style and content depending on the challenging situations facing them. While their content and methodology was fascinating, the book's biggest impact on me was affective. I am not in the same league as these great men, but I felt a deep connection with them.

First, these great preachers were also great theologians. Their names appear regularly in the great theological debates I studied in college. They were extraordinarily able thinkers. These days, great preaching means great communication, and highly regarded theologians are generally not highly regarded preachers. Indeed, a sermon can receive no higher praise than being outstanding communication. Perhaps over recent years we have stopped trying to *think* excellently because we have been trying so hard to *communicate* excellently. But the example of these early church fathers reveals the dichotomy between deep thinking and good communication as chronologically myopic. Transformative preaching contains both. This idea is incredibly liberating.

Further, these church fathers faced the same problems we face. Centuries may change. People don't seem to. For example, reading about Chrysostom's frustration with his congregation's fickle reasons for irregular attendance at worship. Weather (good/bad), too busy/preoccupied - brought a wry smile to my face. It is very easy to get frustrated and angry with people. Nouwen explains this well: "Anger seems close to a professional vice in the contemporary ministry." This is not

an open, blatant, roaring anger, but an anger hidden behind the smooth word, the smiling face, and the polite handshake. It is a frozen anger, an anger which settles into a biting resentment and slowly paralyzes a generous heart.<sup>6</sup> We often think to ourselves, "If only they would understand this, change that, come more regularly." But it turns out they are not the only problem. I remember well a meeting of local pastors where we discussed how virtually anything had become an excuse for us not to come to these cluster groups . weather (good/bad), too busy/preoccupied. I suddenly realized: We are they. The secular pressures that block their ears and crusts over their hearts are doing the same to us! The key question is not how can we preach so they will hear, but how can we preach so we will hear?

### **The Methodological Analysis**

Wright, John W., *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2006

Even the introduction to Wright's book had me captivated. His words resonated deeply with frustrations I have felt.<sup>7</sup> His deductive, exegetical preaching had also been met with polite blankness or even open antagonism.<sup>8</sup> He too was committed to facilitating a genuine encounter with God through the Biblical text, but in a way people could hear. And he had found answers in the rhetorical structures of Buttrick. Oh how I wish I had read this book 10 years ago!<sup>9</sup>

Wright's methodological study contrasts comedic and tragic moments in the hermeneutical experience. The comedic moment is like a TV sitcom . I Love Lucy<sup>10</sup> or The Simpsons<sup>11</sup>. There may be tension in the middle, but harmony and normalness is always restored. The world is the same at the start and end. The tragic moment is more like a dramatic play . Romeo and Juliet. Things don't return to normal . the world and the way we see it gets fundamentally changed.

Wright claims that in our homiletical attempt to fuse the biblical text with the listener's experiential horizon . to make our sermons relevant - we only create comedic moments. Nothing changes from beginning to end, so transformation cannot happen. Even standard deductive preaching is comedic,<sup>12</sup> because it starts and ends in the text. Lives already enmeshed in God's story can hear this, but many (certainly many in our Kiwi congregations) cannot. The sermon is totally foreign, and so often not even heard. Wright suggests that we should create tragic movement in our sermons. Start in the world of the listeners, establish a common frame, understand the world they live in. Then, in announcing the good news, show how the existing secularized frame of the listeners is no longer viable because of the life and work of Jesus. It does not work anymore. You cannot live in God's story and the secular story simultaneously. You have to choose. Finally, the sermon moves into God's story in the text, and explains how life is lived within this new framework.<sup>13</sup>

This makes so much sense! Used with caution and in conjunction with other rhetorical structures, tragic sermons give great hope for transformational change. They honour the text (and the God it

<sup>6</sup> Nouwen, Henri, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981 p23-24

<sup>7</sup> E.g. The congregation was deeply convinced that God's love shown in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit was really about me and the fulfillment of my personal needs. Wright, John W., *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2006 p10

<sup>8</sup> Wright, p11. Admittedly I don't recall much open antagonism!

<sup>9</sup> This admittedly would be some trick, as it was only written a few years ago! Also, to be honest, I don't think I would have recognized its value 10 years ago.

<sup>10</sup> The example Wright used.

<sup>11</sup> The example that (perhaps unfortunately) comes to my mind.

<sup>12</sup> Even deductive preaching that adequately visits the corners of the world and the listener!

<sup>13</sup> The similarities between what Witten terms reframing, and Wright terms tragic movement are not insignificant. Also, note that the tragic rhetorical structure predominantly affects the beginning of the sermon. Once the tragic moment has occurred, a typical deductive structure could (and probably should) happen effectively.

illuminates), but portray it in a way that listeners can hear. It is well worth trialing %magic+rhetorical structures at key points<sup>14</sup> in our church's life.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

As I talk deeply with my colleagues, and as I reflect on my own experiences as a pastor, there are common stories that emerge. The dream of a transformed, transforming community that we all started with has not eventuated quite like we imagined. There are glimmers of grace, certainly, but the *en masse* move towards holiness is less profound than we would have liked it to be. *Sociologically*, our congregations are still quite secular. Indeed, most of them can only even hear secularized preaching. (Witten got that right!) When we left college most of our hopes for *functionally* transforming our community lay in effective preaching. (Quicke got that right!) But we have become driven by a *chronologically myopic* picture of a good preacher as simply a good communicator . how shallow, how secularized. (Dunn-Wilson got that right!) We came to our churches with *theological* convictions of %speaking about God+ (Pasquarello got that right!) These convictions were not wrong, but they were not complete either. We must also be heard. What I suggest is the possibility that Wright is right. And that through including %magic+sermons in our homiletical mix we can honour the text (and the God it points to) in a way our congregations can hear. Certainly, my initial forays into %magic+sermon structures were quite positive.<sup>16</sup> I recognize how small a part we play in inspiring and equipping people to define themselves in God's story. But somewhere between our words, our congregation's hearts and the Spirit's work, we pray and long for such genuine transformation.

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<sup>14</sup> For example at the beginning or end of a sermon series

<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to categorically claim %magic sermons worked at HBC+given that I resigned (to start doing a Ph.D. full time) only a year and a half after I started inserting them regularly into the homiletical mix there. My %guess+from such a short period is that they can significantly assist a congregation to be transformed if used sparingly (no more than 1 in 8) and are complemented by other strategies. They should not be seen as a silver bullet!

<sup>16</sup> An example of one my early attempts at a %magic+sermon in a contemporary Kiwi setting is the sermon on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 2008, entitled %Whatever you do for the least of these+, accessible at <http://www.hillsbc.org.nz/Whatever-You-Do->.