CONFESSIONAL PREACHING

Consultation on Preaching
Stone Mountain, Georgia
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It seemed appropriate to me, given the subject I was assigned, to begin with a brief confession of how I began to preach confessionally. This was not a methodology that I was taught by my academic mentors nor do I recall having it modeled for me in the early days of my professional formation. If anything, this style of proclamation was actually frowned upon. The few times confessional material did appear in a sermon, there would always be the disclaimer, "Please pardon the personal reference." I realize why this methodology was shunned and shall attempt to deal with it later in the paper. The point I am making now is that I literally stumbled into this mode of preaching quite unintentionally. The first experience of it, I remember, was during the days I was the assistant pastor not far from here at the First Baptist Church of Decatur. I was doing a series of Sunday night sermons aimed at the specific problems facing the youth of that day. When it came time to address the issue of faith and doubt, I decided to recount my journey out of innocence into secondhand faith through the void of not knowing until truth really did begin to happen for me as an adult. There was an electric quality to that particular part of the sermon. All of you here know what I am talking about--those all too-rare

moments when, to use Paul Scherer's term, "it sung." I was very aware of this and also impressed by some things that happened subsequently. In the next few days, no less than ten folk made appointments to come by and talk and began by saying, "I heard you say the other night that you had trouble believing. I'd like to talk some more about that." This, of course, is one of the serendipitous facets of the act of preaching. It does create a certain image of the proclaimer which can either open or close subsequent doors of ministry. People do not just hear the sermons we preach; they are also sizing up our competence and trustworthiness and often make up their minds whether they want to entrust their deeper selves to intimate interaction with us by virtue of the sermon. Wayne Oates used to say that no preacher is ever paid a higher compliment than having some frightened, timid soul come up after a sermon and say quietly, "I wonder if I could speak with you privately about certain things that are a deep concern to me?" My point is that the unveiling of my personal struggle with doubt and faith seemed to connect up with other doubters. It took the shame and isolation out of a certain kind of experience and opened the way for future sharing. I moved to Crescent Hill in October of 1960 and within the first months there had occasion to use a variation of that sermon and had the same thing happen. Folk who were struggling with their own experiences of doubt sought me out because of what I had shared. The interesting thing to me now is that these two experiences did not register more deeply on me or alter my preaching

style. Although I was impressed by these phenomena, I do not recall utilizing this strategy more often. Some years later I did share some of my own struggles in coming to positive self-esteem, but it was not until July of 1969 that a family tragedy set the stage for me really to experience the power of confessional preaching. As some of you may remember, this was the time when my eight-and-a-half -year old daughter was diagnosed as having leukemia. I got the fateful word on a Wednesday afternoon and made no attempt to preach the following Sunday. But some eleven days after this word, I entered the pulpit with the awareness that everyone in the congregation knew what had happened to us and what I had been doing with the last days of my life. It seemed to me that there was nothing else to do in that moment but share with my family in Christ some of my own reflections on the events of those days. And this is what I did. I preached two other sermons in a similar vein in the next eighteen months--one after Laura Lue had relapsed from her first remission and then a sermon some five or six weeks after her death. Those three preaching events opened my eyes as never before to the authentic potency of letting what has happened to you begin to happen through you as you honestly share it with other people. It was at this juncture of my career that I began to reflect on this whole methodology of regarding one's own experiences--both positive and negative-- as a resource for preaching. That was some twelve years ago now, and in this intervening period, I have thought a

great deal about this approach to preaching, and I would like to identify now several conclusions which I have come to and then in conjunction with my dear friend, John Carlton, engage with you in a dialogue about this.

As I began to reflect critically on this methodology, I discovered three positive things about it. First of all, it was consistent with one of the primal images Jesus used in commissioning His followers for the post-Ascension phase of His ministry. "Ye shall be witnesses unto me," Jesus said, "to the whole world." What is a witness? It is a law court image. A witness is a person who is placed under oath and then invited to tell as honestly and completely as possible his or her own experience of a given event. The task of the witness is not to climb into the jury box and force his or her interpretation on other people. No, their sole responsibility is to describe honestly their own experience of a given process. Jesus did not begin to commission witnesses after His resurrection. Do you recall His remarkable encounter with the Gadarene demoniac? My most recent mentor, Myron Madden, suggests that this man's problem in all likelihood was unresolved grief. Jesus found him literally beside himself in a cemetery. Madden speculates that he had experienced some kind of loss and could not come to terms with it. He was literally immobilized in a graveyard, and Jesus came and opened the way for him to get things together and let go the past and move into the future with courage and hope. What a great ministry to perform for any "person of sorrow, acquainted with grief!" Understandably, the healed griever wanted

to stay with the Source of his healing. But Jesus said, "No, go back to your own region and tell folk there what the Lord has done in and for you." This was confessional preaching, if you please, sharing with others those realities that are saving you. This is what it means "to bear witness." I was amazed when I began to reflect how old and central such a procedure had always been in Christian history.

That insight led me on to realize that this was a methodology that St. Paul also utilized extensively in his work. Someone asked me once why the story of Saul's conversion on the Damascus road is related in detail three times in the Acts of the Apostles. My spontaneous reply was because he probably told it three thousand times! My hunch is that everywhere the great missionary statesman went, he began by saying, "Let me tell you how I ever got into this business in the first place. Here is what happened to me. Perhaps this can become the beginning point of what can happen to you ~~or will~~ as well." Those of you who are students of the Pauline literature realize that not just the event on the Damascus road, but many other experiences were called into the service of Paul's proclamation--his "thorn in the flesh," his encounter with Peter, his shipwrecks and beatings. He makes what happened to him a vehicle of what might happen through him.

These Biblical precedents led me to a third conclusion, and that is that confessional preaching is true to the incarnational

principle that seems to be one of God's primary ways of doing His work in history. We are all familiar with the affirmation in the Prologue to John's Gospel; namely, that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Among other things, this means that God did not keep His distance from us; He really became involved totally in all the agonies of history. As the early church fathers put it, "He became what we are that we might become what He is." And my sense is that confessional preaching is participation in that same form of involvement where the preacher gets down into the very realities that he proclaims to other fellow strugglers. The power of confessional preaching is that it does narrow the distance between the pulpit and the pew. It assumes the stance of "the inclusive we" rather than "the over-against you," and this form of communication does have potency, not just in preaching but in all forms of relationships.

John Powell, the Jesuit priest out of Loyola in Chicago, identifies four levels of communication in his well-known little book, Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am? The first level is what he calls "cliche communication." This is the ritualizing we do on elevators and at receptions and coctail parties where nothing really significant is intended or expected; it is simply a way of handling superficial relationships. The second level is what he calls "sharing facts or information about people and subjects." At its worst, it takes the form of gossip; at its best,

it can be disinterested inquiry about a commonly-held subject. The third level is when you share your own ideas, opinions and judgment about things. You are no longer simply sharing information objectively, but you risk your own interpretation of this information with another. The fourth level Powell identifies is when you "share your own feelings, how all of this strikes you and where you are in relation to it." This is "gut-level communication," to use Powell's term, and this is where authentic intimacy is to be found. I would suggest that confessional preaching comes closest to this fourth level of communication. You could take these levels and probably remember sermons you have heard or perhaps preached that fall into each category. However, confessional preaching is "struggling with the angel, as Jacob did, and when this happens, the preacher becomes a participant and not a spectator in the process he is addressing and a certain urgency, an existential vitality enters that simply does not exist at other levels of communication.

I remember hearing Harvey Cox tell years ago of going into the Army during World War II and being assigned to the paratroop division, although at the time he had never even been up in an airplane. The training program was highly accelerated, being taught by a veteran jumper. Cox reported that nobody had to nudge him to keep him awake during that instruction, for he and all the others knew full well that in a matter of days they were going to be up in an airplane and have to jump. That realization made them hang on

every word with vital interest. Cox went on to comment that the trouble with so much of our life in the Church is that it does not have that life or death urgency about it. We seem to be transferring information that is interesting to know but does not make much difference. What a contrast this is to D. T. Niles' famous image of preaching, which is that of "one starving beggar telling other beggars where he has found bread." When the things that are saving me or the things that are troubling me become the heart of pulpit interaction, there is an involvement, a closing of the distance that seems to me is a valid extension of the incarnational principle. The Word did not just become words. God did not placidly step down out on the ramparts of heaven and talk down His truth to our anguished planet. No, the Word became flesh, got involved with us, plunged into all the ambiguities and agonies that constitute our not-yet-complete creation. And the preacher who plunges into the same chaotic struggle and willingly shares both the light and the darkness that are his or her experience of it, is doing something very true, I think, to the pattern of all divine saving.

Here, then, are some of my positive conclusions about the method of confessional preaching. Let me turn now to some of the obvious dangers and potential weaknesses of this approach to preaching. I cannot think of anything in all creation that cannot be misuse or overused or wrongly-used. Therefore, it does not discredit the approach to recognize clearly that for all its

potency, it certainly carries liabilities and perils as well. What are they? Let me utilize the two questions that have always been the classic instruments of ethical analysis; namely, what is one's motive, and what are the likely consequences to result if one acts a certain way.[2]

It is very important to ask of any episode of confessional preaching: Why am I doing this? Is it to get something for myself or to give something of myself for the growth and benefit of others? Obviously, confessional preaching could easily become an excuse for exhibitionism, a subtle attempt to draw attention to ourselves for whatever sick need of recognition this might represent. My brilliant successor at Crescent Hill, Stephen Shoemaker, wrote me a very thoughtful response to my Beecher Lectures where I discussed this whole strategy of preaching. He said his uneasiness was that confessional preaching directed the attention of the congregation to the preacher rather than to the drama of the Gospel. In such a process, the preacher emerges as either hero or goal, depending upon how he presents himself, and this could be a real diversion from what authentic preaching is all about. I heartily agree with this danger. Reinhold Niebuhr reminded a whole generation of our forbears that our human proclivity ~~of~~ to self-serving is virtually unlimited. We are capable of using anything and everything--even the act of preaching--to gain some self-enhancement at the expense of others. And, therefore, anyone who would ever utilize this strategy must be aware of this danger and ask soberly, "Am I buying something here or am I giving something? Is this an expression of "need-love," as C. S. Lewis

defines it, that emptiness in me that causes me to reach out to another for the purpose of getting something from that object that I might transfer it back to my own emptiness?" This is an extractive, exploitive, manipulative process, and who of us can claim to have been above it always in our preaching? Why do you quote from Camus or John Updike or Sören Kierkegaard or Karl Barth?

"Is it simply because in honesty you want" to identify where you received a certain truth or is it to impress your peers that you are conversant with such giants? Confessional preaching is open to the special temptation of being an act of need-love; however it can also be an expression of "gift love." It can be part of the fulness that a generous, graced preacher is willing to share for the enhancement of others, not their extraction. Therefore the motive issue is an exceedingly important one for all preaching, but certainly for the use of ts confessional form.

The other question to ask is, What is the likely consequence of such an action? And here I think we have to be very realistic in saying the possibility of disillusioning and discouraging parishioners is inherent and needs to be taken into account. In my experience with confessional preaching, on more than one occasion, I have had people get upset by my sharing certain shadows and struggles in my experience, or downright

enraged that I did not "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, and not mess with Mr. In-between." The basic principle of American advertising is to focus exclusively on the positive and exude only a shining image. Thus, we will need to discuss in our dialogue what it does to people in the pew when they hear the spokesperson for a certain ideal acknowledge that he or she has not yet arrived, very much still in the process. I certainly concede that there are types of experiences and specific individuals where this strategy could be counterproductive for growth, and one needs to exercise this form of preaching with as much wisdom as one makes all the distinctions of pastoral practice. However, having recognized this, I would at least raise the question if we do not ultimately run a greater risk of disillusioning people by attempting to convey a state of perfectionism that is beyond our actual reality? If the preacher can never share any of his incompleteness or "the shadow side" that represent the areas where he has yet to grow, sooner or later these are going to come to light, and then having made no room for such possibilities may well discourage idealistic folk more than an honest admission of the realities. I have said many times that I think it is very important where in the process of life we positionize the perfect and the ideal. If is is made our omega point, that toward which we strive and by which we evaluate our progress, it has unending power to inspire and to develop and to

mature us. But, if we ever come to the idea that perfection can be embodied in the midst of the process, or convey to other people that we have "arrived" or that such arrival is a possibility, that, it seems to me is the seedbed of disillusionment. Process appears to be God's way of growing all things to their fulness: "first the seed, then the blade and then the flower." All of us are incomplete, not get being what we have it in us to be. And while one needs to exercise discretion in what one reveals to whom, it seems to me that confessional preaching can take the shame and isolation out of struggle and incompleteness, can give other strugglers companionship in what they face, and in lifting the illusion of perfectionism off their shoulders, can offer a real resource for growth in the way.

Here, then, are my reflections on confessional preaching. This is by no means "the last word" on the subject. It is offered as the first word in an ongoing coversation. Confessional preaching is by no means the only form that authentic proclamation should assume. It is but one tool in the good craftsman's tool-chest. No one should use it exclusively; however, my sense is if you never use it, you are overlooking a real potential to bless. The things that have happened to us have great potency when we allow them to happen through us in open sharing. Here's what I think.

What, now, do you say in response?