

Preaching Without Guile

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Abstract

This little article originally appeared as a featured piece on page 7, Vol. LX, NO. 445 of the September/October 1980 issue of *Pulpit Digest*. It is simply an encouragement to preach with what is known in the therapeutic world as the quality of "genuineness." The article is reproduced here just as it appeared nearly forty years ago with the exception that it has been made more gender inclusive.

I shall ever be thankful for the college professor, Dr. Phyllis Dabbs, who was determined that we would learn the art of public speaking without "sounding like a preacher." "Your speech should be elevated in style," she would say, "but conversational in delivery." It was her conviction that a good speaker would speak with a naturalness which shows that he or she is for real. It is an unfortunate truth that many pastors and preachers seem to become someone else the moment they enter the pulpit. Gestures and stances become mere affectations, they assume an exaggerated seriousness or display a kind of saccharin sweetness, the voice changes and often there is even a difference in the way words are pronounced, I know of a brilliant and in many ways very effective minister from Kansas who talks like anyone else in a normal conversation but who cannot preach without pronouncing "God" as "Gott." One Texas preacher developed a speaking accent that prompted people to ask if he was from Scotland.

There are several possible reasons for this tone of artificiality in much of the preaching we hear. First of all is the intense longing of many good and honest hearted preachers to communicate a powerful and moving sense of reverence, earnestness, or love, yet these things are best communicated by a simple sincerity. The unnatural exaggeration of any Christian attitude or quality becomes a farcical caricature of life in the Spirit.

Secondly, preaching may sound unreal because the preacher is imitating someone else. Youthful ministers and seminary students in particular may hear an outstanding speaker and think that if they preach just like them they will communicate the Christian message with the same effectiveness. What they may have missed is the fact that, at least in part, it is God's use of that person's own unique personality that makes him or her so effective. Speaking the word within the context of one's own individuality gives color, depth, distinctiveness, and force. In both the sacred writings and from the pulpit God speaks to us through an infinite variety of human talents, perspectives, and experiences. Those preachers preach best who are themselves without being eccentric.

Thirdly, the fear of being seen as we are may interfere with preaching freely and naturally. The shell of a synthetic personality protects our soft inner parts as we stand before the people — protects us from criticism and rejection. But as Sidney Jourard pointed out in

The Transparent Self, "When we are not truly known then we are misunderstood," and to be misunderstood is something no minister of the word wants for our very task is that of speaking God's revelation with clarity. If Christian men and women are going to learn to be transparently honest with themselves, with others, and with Jesus Christ, then they need to see that kind of honestly concretely actualized in the pulpit.

Fourthly, the belief that the exercise of proper technique will lead to good oratory also contributes to artificiality in preaching. Our society as a whole has come to believe that success in any field can be achieved just as it is in any business or technological enterprise — through the discovery and application of correct methodology. The elocutionary movement which began around 1750 sought to systematically apply scientific principles to public speaking and in doing so developed elaborate charts for the proper use of gesture, voice, and facial expressions in preaching. The extremes to which the elocutionists went are now humorous but something of their inordinate confidence in right technique is still with us. Great preaching is never the result of mere technique. It is not the studied performance of one who watches him or herself, but rather the natural overflowing of one who knows God and the terrible needs of humanity. Barclay closed his book *Fishers of Men* by saying, "in the last analysis our preaching depends on nothing more than our love of Jesus Christ and our love for the men and women for whom Christ died."

Sometimes preaching may sound somewhat artificial because the problem is primarily mechanical rather than spiritual. A sermon may lose much of its freshness and vitality because of over-familiarity with a written manuscript. In that situation the problem is relatively easily solved by turning to a more extemporaneous style.

Finally, some preachers may sound phony because they are phony. There are self-serving ministers who preach only to impress. That sounds terrible but it is true, and where it is true the only possible remedy is a radical inner conversion of the person.

The great trouble is that if preaching is not natural it makes religion itself seem disconnected from actual human experience. When men and women come to church, they ought to feel they have come into contact with ultimate reality which has to do with love, marriage, children, earning a living, laughing, crying, aging, dying and all the rest of it. James Black in *The Mystery of Preaching* wrote:

Our task today is to show people, especially young people, that religion is human nature in all its natural bigness, glorified and perfected in Jesus Christ, that Jesus does not limit or starve the manhood or womanhood which is God's gift to us. Therefore I say even for the dignity and praise of religion, you do better in the long run to err on the side of naturalness than on the side of stiffness. Cultivate the easy good grace of any poised and confident speaker. Try to be at your ease without being cheap, and speak in the natural voice God has given you, trained by the laws of decent voice production.

Genuineness is now universally recognized among counselors as a therapeutic variable. Other people are helped when we are freely and deeply ourselves. Genuineness removes barriers. People with many desperate maladies come to hear our preaching in hopes of finding answers, and if we have learned to be at least partially transparent, then we can establish a helping relationship with them. But even more importantly they may see dimly into our own hearts and thus the Christ who lives there. Honesty in the pulpit will also model for people what it means to be real in a plastic society.

Scripture speaks of Jesus as one in whom there was no deceit." When he spoke men and women knew they were listening to something and someone totally authentic. The master has shown us the way. Preaching must be absolutely guileless.