



# Hermeneutics and Preaching

by Stephen Wright

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*Every preacher is an interpreter. Hence, the study of hermeneutics, the art or science of interpretation, is of immediate relevance to preaching. Conversely, some of the most important interpretative acts are focused in preaching. So reflection on preaching is of immediate relevance to hermeneutics, writes Stephen Wright.*

Unfortunately, academic hermeneutics can seem abstruse, and quite divorced from the Church's ministry of the Word. That ministry, in turn, can seem to the student of hermeneutics fraught with the dangers of over-simplification.

I am convinced that the preacher, while not needing to be a philosopher, will profit much from reflecting on the interpretative acts in which s/he is involved. Sometimes Christians are dismissive of the notion of interpretation. It carries overtones for them of imposing one's own meaning on a text, or digging up dubious "deeper" meanings bearing marks of eccentricity, doctrinal hobby-horses or florid allegorising. The preacher is urged by contrast to be simply a channel for the text in its "plain meaning" and unmitigated force.

But this is naïve. It not only underplays the element of human responsibility in handling Scripture – as if God speaks to people through the Bible via the preacher's mouth, but not via the preacher's mind! It also ignores the fact that "interpretation" is directed towards other objects in addition to Scripture.

These critics of "interpretation" in preaching have, however, correctly recognised that interpretation involves mental effort and

imagination, exercised in respect of texts, things or persons that do not yield their meaning to us instantly. Before we draw out further the meaning of "interpretation" in this context, we will look at what and who is being interpreted every time a sermon is prepared and preached. This is not an individualistic exercise; preaching ideally focuses interpretation that is carried out by God's people as a whole. But for simplicity, we will look at interpretation from the preacher's perspective.

First, the preacher interprets *God*. God does not yield up his meaning to the world in ways which are now self-evident. True, "God is his own interpreter"; Christ, his Word, has made him known (John 1.18). But the Incarnation itself set in train a process of interpretation that will continue to the end of the age, such are the inexhaustible riches of Christ.

Secondly, then, the preacher interprets *the gospel*. The good news of Christ has been passed down through text and tradition. It has gone through a process of translation not only linguistic but contextual, and this process of translation continues as we preach today. Christ does not change, incarnate, crucified, risen; but what makes the gospel good in 2001? If we do not

interpret the gospel, we end up merely making a historical report.

Thirdly, we interpret *Scripture*. Note that I have distinguished this from interpreting God and interpreting the gospel. God speaks through Scripture; Scripture is the story of the gospel writ large; yet to talk of "interpreting Scripture" as if that were *the same thing* as "interpreting God" or "interpreting the gospel" is to short-circuit the very questions the Church must ask. What does God say today in Britain through stories of holy war, psalms of imprecation or prophecies of a homeland? Where is today's good news in the stories of Jesus' healings or Paul's travels?

There are many intricate textual and philosophical matters involved in *academic* "interpretation of Scripture". But it is these larger issues concerning the relationship of God, gospel and Bible which rightly dominate the interpretative energy of preachers and give us perspective on these finer points.

Fourthly, preachers interpret *the world*. The Church's whole interpretative thrust up to the sixteenth century was towards understanding the world through the lens of Scripture, rather than towards understanding Scripture

using the tools of the world. Though we cannot return to the days before critical questioning of Scripture, we can let the Bible shape again the way we see the world in which we live. Preaching can have a vital function in passing on such a vision.

The Bible is not, of course, a timeless grid to be placed over the multiple activities of humankind, allowing instant judgement and guidance. Nor do we neglect the human and natural “sciences”. Rather, we apply our minds to letting God’s historical and personal revelation organise and assess all that human study can teach us about his world.

Fifthly, preachers interpret *the congregation*. No effective communication will take place unless speakers reckon with the identity of their hearers. Again, we cannot simply read off a “meaning” from our listeners’ faces. Even when we “know” them, there are depths of personal history and webs of social interconnection that thwart all attempts at simplistic characterisation of a congregation. Here interpretation emerges as a wager, an act of faith that somehow, on different levels, through our best efforts and the Spirit’s operation, what we say will fit the people and the occasion.

Sixthly, the preacher interprets *him/herself*. Our understanding of our own story, including the influence of the gospel upon us, shapes the way we present the gospel to others. That story will be constantly reinterpreted as we reflect upon it in the light of Scripture, the Spirit and experience. Further, we will be constantly reinterpreting our calling as preachers. The question that must sometimes have occurred to most preachers, “What on earth am I doing *here*?” is not to be swept under the carpet in shame. It is a signal of the extraordinary nature of the work of ongoing interpretation that Christ has entrusted to us. Interpretation must itself be interpreted.

The awesome truth (and challenge!) is that the preacher’s task as interpreter is to unite all these dimensions in a single, many-sided interpretative act.

When we remember that the congregation as they listen are involved in a similarly complex process of interpretation, which there is no space to spell out here, we glimpse the richness of the preaching moment.

Now that we have seen the objects of interpretation in preaching, let me suggest three ingredients of interpretation, the implications of which are worth further exploration.

First, and notwithstanding the above-mentioned misgivings of some, “interpretation” means *going deeper*. It implies continued dissatisfaction with superficiality, in understanding God or any of the other objects of interpretation.

Second, “interpretation” means *going broader*. One object of interpretation is placed alongside another to give a context to both. Scripture and the world are brought together; God is seen alongside gospel and experience; and so on, in a complex series of permutations.

Third, “interpretation” is *personal*. Preacher and hearers interpret God, Scripture and the other entities I have listed not in a vacuum (as in much purely academic “interpretation”), but in *relationship*. We see the personal dimension not only in God, congregation and preacher, but also in gospel and Scripture (passed on by humans) and world (in which humans are central agents).

The personal element is our vulnerability, but also our glory. The intellectual climate is deeply suspicious of all claims to authoritative interpretation. But even in more hospitable times, the preacher reflecting on his/her unique position as an interpreter might well tremble at the responsibility, and at the possibilities for abuse. Here, however, we realise that personal trust is central to the whole hermeneutical process, above all as it is focused in preaching. It is a two-way trust between God and people, and among people, that ultimately enables living interpretation to happen in the Church.

In an environment where not only God but humanity itself is often treated with disdain, the *relationships* at the heart of hermeneutics and preaching are to be treasured. ■