

EXPOSITORY PREACHING DURING THE REFORMATION (1500-1648)

In noting the relation of the Reformation to preaching, Dargan said the “great events and achievements of that mighty revolution were largely the work of preachers and preaching; for it was by the Word of God through the ministry of earnest men who believed, loved and taught it, that the best and most enduring work of the Reformation was done.”¹ Despite centuries of dismal preaching, God utilized both pre-reformers such as Wycliffe and Huss and reformatory voices such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli to restore preaching to the central position in worship. The dawn of the Sixteenth Century displayed both social and religious institutions that were ripe for reform. Homiletical contributions from this period have reverberated through the centuries and can still be noted in contemporary expository preaching.

The Social Setting that led to Spiritual Reformation

The beginning of the Sixteenth Century brought little change from the previous century on the national leadership horizon, but changes made shortly thereafter would provide voices of support for religious reformation. One of those voices was Charles V, who came to power in Germany in 1519. In Charles V, Luther would eventually find a sympathetic voice. Other rulers such as England’s Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Elizabeth provided leadership that contributed to the pursuit of Protestantism in their country. A general disdain for the papacy was building amongst numerous national leaders, which led to England, France, Bohemia, and Italy separating from subordination to the Pope and opened a political door for a religious reformation.²

Beyond national leadership, the social developments and affairs of the people also contributed to reform. Great emphasis was placed on learning, discovery, and even a Revival of Letters that each contributed in its own way to reformatory efforts. Crucial to religious reformation was the invention of the printing press, which provided access to the Scriptures to the masses rather than just the privileged priests.³ Because of the printing press, Luther’s translation of the Scriptures into German, as well as other reformation publications could be disseminated like never before in the vernacular of the people.

As both clerical immorality and the abuse of indulgences steadily increased, so did the people’s frustration and bitterness toward their religious leadership. Wycliffe and Huss came onto the scene as pre-runners to the reformation with their cries for the Bible to be the sole authority of Christians and their condemnations of clergy. Tension between those in the church seeking to maintain power and those seeking to find Truth came to a head when an Augustinian monk named Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg on Oct. 31, 1517.

¹Edwin Charles Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, vol. 1 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 366.

²David L. Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 142.

³*Ibid.*

Homiletical Reformation

Reformation preaching impacted not only those operating in religious circles, but events and principles of the entire reformatory movement have been categorized as reactions to sermons voiced by the period's great orators. The preaching during the days of the movement has been described as "not chiefly rhetorical or communicational but theological" with the conviction that scriptural authority "made biblical preaching a necessity."⁴ The restoration of preaching to a central place in worship was in large part due to the reformers' use of Scripture in their sermons. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and others believed the Bible was the Christian's sole authority; therefore, they sought to make their sermons an exposition of Scripture.⁵ Emphasis was placed upon the exact application of Biblical passages to matters of doctrine, especially with regard to preaching the doctrines of grace. Preachers of the period utilized the vernacular of the people so that the masses might understand the errors being refuted in both the polemical and doctrinal preaching that characterized the period. The reformers declined to utilize the tales of the saints and other stories that had been greatly employed by previous centuries of preachers, because of their desire to offer reasoned interpretations of Biblical passages. The emphasis upon Scripture drove many of the reformers back to a use of homilies that demonstrated a decrease in "logical analysis and of oratorical movement," which described both their predecessors and followers, but painstakingly clear exposition of biblical passages.⁶ The passion and integrity with which the reformers approached Scripture in both preparation and proclamation is what led to the Sixteenth Century becoming one of the greatest periods in preaching history.

Representative Preachers

Indeed, the list of preachers in the selected time period is amazing. To begin, Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a theologian/preacher. After being converted to Christ through his own teaching of the book of Romans, Luther helped lead the Protestant reformation (his ninety-five theses was posted in 1517). He was a university professor, but also was constantly preaching at town churches. In 1528, he preached about 200 times.⁷ Luther was a strong advocate of studying the languages, and for preaching in the common tongue of the people. His great theological theme was "justification by faith *alone*." We currently have about 2,300 of his sermons. Dargan claimed Luther was "looking upon preaching as the exposition of the Word, and by no means as a man's oratorical performance."⁸

Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), a Swiss Reformer, became Pastor of Grossmunster Church at Zurich in 1519. He announced that he would be giving a series of expositions from the book of Matthew. Referring to this reality, Stanfield noted, "Thus the Swiss Reformation began

⁴Ibid., 142-143.

⁵Dargan, 376-379.

⁶Ibid., 380.

⁷John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 77-111.

⁸Dargan, 372.

with the preaching of the Word of God.”⁹ Though partners in ministry with Luther, the two developed opposing views on the Lord’s Supper. As to his character Stanfield said, “His religious life was not as deep or pure as that of Luther or Calvin, yet it was sincere and strong.”¹⁰ His style of preaching revealed the influence of humanistic studies. His language was popular, clear and moving.

John Calvin (1509-1564) began studying law but eventually became a towering figure of the reformation and a gifted expository preacher. At age twenty-six he wrote the *Institutes* (expanded five times). He used Greek and Hebrew with ease. He was both a Pastor and Professor. Calvin preached book after book and his sermons lasted about an hour. He preached through Acts for six years. After Acts, he preached through 1 Thessalonians (forty-six sermons), Corinthians (186 sermons), the pastoral epistles (eighty-six sermons), Galatians (forty-three sermons), and Ephesians (forty-eight sermons). After preaching on Easter day in 1538, he was banished from the City Council. When he arrived back in September 1541, he picked up on the next verse!¹¹ His style was simple, conversational, and direct, and he never quoted Greek and Hebrew from the pulpit. He and Luther shared the same hermeneutic philosophy (historical-grammatical) and similar theology.

Theodore Beza (1545-1605) was a close friend and associate of Calvin. He has been described as a “many-sided professor, church leader, and tireless preacher.”¹² In 1559, he was called to Geneva to teach Greek and help Calvin. Immediately, he began preaching frequently there. Stanfield noted that he had a “fine presence, a ready wit, a keen intellect, and excellent choice of language and a ready utterance.”¹³ His view of God’s comprehensive sovereignty created many controversies with people like Jacob Arminius (1559-1609). Arminius was a pastor in Amsterdam for 15 years.

John Knox (1505-1572) helped lead the Scottish Reformation. He was first a priest, but after study of the Scriptures accepted the evangelical faith. He was ordained in 1540, and in 1541 began preaching the reformed doctrine.¹⁴ He began with Expositions on John at the Castle Chapel in St. Andrews. Later in Edinburgh, Scotland he expounded the Scriptures daily. Knox was also courageous in politics and was opposed to the leadership of Queen Elizabeth. He also influenced the Westminster Confession. His preaching was plain and direct, with a homily nature.¹⁵

Moving into the next century, several names are important to homileticians. William Perkins (1558-1602) was both a pivotal figure in theology and homiletics. His text called *The Art*

⁹V.L. Stanfield, *Notes on the History of Preaching* (New Orleans: NOBTS Printing Department, 1953), 74.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Piper, 139.

¹²Stanfield, 81.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 83.

¹⁵Ibid.

of Prophesying was probably the first English preaching text (originally in Latin). Perkins preached with a plain style giving the literal sense of the passage at St. Andrews church. He influenced many Puritan preachers including Richard Baxter. Another Puritan, Richard Sibbes (1577-1635), studied at Cambridge and was named college preacher in 1609. Sibbes was a staunch Calvinist but valued experience and feeling. He eventually followed Goodwin as Vicar of Trinity in Cambridge. Jean Claude (1619-1687) was the pastor of several churches in France. His preaching consisted of taking the subject from the text, and preaching the subject. Claude was far more given to the classical and literary style of his predecessors.¹⁶ He wrote *Essay on the Composition of a Sermon*, which greatly influenced Charles Simeon in his *Horae Homileticae*. Many others developed their style of preaching from his work as well.

Homiletical Works

Few homiletics books were written during this period. Perhaps, it was due to the exhausting lifestyles of the preachers. Nevertheless, a few texts remain noteworthy. Andrew Hyperius wrote two books on preaching, *On the Making of Sacred Discourse* and *Topica Theologica*. The former was called by Harnack, “the first really scientific work on the theory of preaching.”¹⁷ Later it was called *The Practice of Preaching* when it was Englished in 1577. Desiderius Erasmus (1461-1536) wrote *On Preaching* in 1535. He said of teaching preachers, “If elephants can be trained to dance and lions to play and leopards to hunt, surely preachers can be taught to preach.”¹⁸ The outline of the text is: (I) The dignity of the preaching office; (II) Doctrines and precepts on the art of preaching; and (III) Particular subjects for pulpit treatment. He too advocated the leading out the natural sense of the passage.

Table Talk was a collection of conversations that Martin Luther had with others, which provided insight into the life of Luther. Though it was not a preaching text, it provided help in understanding Luther’s philosophy of preaching. Luther clearly showed the need for preaching the Word throughout the text. He identified the following nine marks of effective pastors: (1) be able to teach systematically; (2) possess a ready wit; (3) be eloquent; (4) possess a good voice; (5) possess a good memory; (6) know when to end; (7) be sure of doctrine; (8) engage body and blood, wealth and honor in the Word; and (9) be ready to be mocked and jeered of everyone.¹⁹

William Perkins’s *The Art of Prophesying* was published in English in 1606. In the brief opening chapter, he explains what he means by prophesying. He then spends the next four chapters focusing on the content, interpretation, and exposition of the Scripture, which he describes as perfect, pure and eternal. Perkins gives two chapters to the use and variety of application which he defines as “the skill by which the doctrine which has been properly drawn from Scripture is handled in ways which are appropriate to the circumstances of the place and

¹⁶Ibid., 91.

¹⁷Quoted in Larsen, 202.

¹⁸Quote in Larsen, 151.

¹⁹Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, edited with an introduction by Thomas S. Kepler (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979).

time and to the people in the congregation.”²⁰ In summary, he states that preaching involves: (1) Reading the text clearly from the canonical Scriptures; (2) Explaining the meaning of it, once it has been read, in the light of the Scriptures themselves; (3) Gathering a few profitable points of doctrine from the natural sense of the passage; (4) If the preacher is suitably gifted, applying the doctrines thus explained to the life and practice of the congregation in straightforward, plain speech. He concludes saying, “The heart of the matter is this: Preach on Christ, by Christ, to the praise of Christ. To God alone be the glory.”²¹

Jean Claude produced *Essay on the Composition of the Sermon* in 1779. A version of this theory can be found at the end of Simeon’s sermons on Revelation. Claude championed for serious explanation and “perpetual application.” He dealt with the exordium and introduction, and lobbied for conclusions which were to be “lively and animating” full of great and beautiful figures, aiming to move the Christian affections.”²²

²⁰William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, rev. by Sinclair Ferguson (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 54.

²¹Ibid., 79.

²²Quoted in Larsen, 209.

Selected Bibliography

Dargan, Edwin Charles. *A History of Preaching*. Vol. 1. New York: Burt Franklin, 1968.

Larsen, David L. *The Company of the Preachers*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001.

Luther, Martin. *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*. Edited by Thomas S. Kepler. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979.

Perkins, William. *The Art of Prophesying*. Revised by Sinclair Ferguson. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002.

Piper, John. *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000.

Stanfield, V.L. *Notes on the History of Preaching*. Second Edition. New Orleans: NOBTS Printing Department, 1963.