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“No Authority in the New Homiletic”

Introduction

Attempts to redefine authority in preaching are producing damaging results. The proponents of the New Homiletic have subtly launched a war on Scripture that will lead to a weakening of the preaching event. David Allen states, “The issue of authority has been the quintessential issue of the Enlightenment and especially of the twentieth century.”¹ This paper seeks to demonstrate the weakness of the New Homiletic as a result of its diminishing view of biblical authority. Mark Howell notes, “An appropriate homiletic method for preaching in a postmodern culture must be one that seeks to make legitimate claims and ground preaching in biblical authority.”²

The purpose of this paper is accomplished through an overview of the historical context of authority in the New Homiletic, including the key works contributing to the denigration of authority. Next, three disciplines within the New Homiletic are examined. Then, a brief look is given to some assumptions made by proponents of the New Homiletic that led to a false view of authority. Finally, an assessment of the dangers for the future of preaching as a result of the fall of authority within the New Homiletic is provided.

Historical Context

Noting the historical context of biblical authority in the New Homiletic, David Allen states, “In the eighteenth century . . . the old road was marked with the old sign ‘Authority of Revelation’ . . . the new road sign read ‘Autonomy of Reason.’”³ It is this autonomy of reason

¹ David L. Allen, “A Tale of Two Roads: Homiletics and Biblical Authority,” *JETS* 43 (2000): 489.

² Mark H. Howell, “Hermeneutical Bridges and Homiletical Methods: A Comparative Analysis of The New Homiletic and Expository Preaching Theory 1970-1995” (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Seminary, May 1999), 206.

³ Allen, 496.

that characterizes much of the New Homiletic. The primary works of the authors of the New Homiletics emphasize an authority that is subjective to the preacher and hearer. Grant Lovejoy notes that this subjectivity causes the proponents of the New Homiletic to “lose whatever claim they make for divine authorization of their message.”⁴ Allen traces this subjectivity back to Karl Barth, noting that Stanley Grenz mimics Barth’s view of scriptural authority indicating that the Bible is “revelation in a derivative sense” and that the “Bible is functional revelation.”⁵ It is this sense of the functionality of revelation that results in a subjective authority of Scripture for the proponents of the New Homiletic. The New Homiletic is not merely a branch of Evangelicalism, but rather a birth from liberalism. Allen believes this Barthian emphasis in the New Homiletic is what distinguishes evangelical preaching from non-evangelical preaching.⁶

Most major movements within Christianity find footing in seminal works that not only define the movement, but serve as catalysts for the proposal of new theories. Six books serve as foundational resources for the discovery of the view of biblical authority within the New Homiletic. Although other works contribute to the New Homiletic in the areas of sermon methodology and delivery, the following works are foundational to the New Homiletic’s deteriorating view of authority.

The work that launched the denigration of authority in the New Homiletic is Fred Craddock’s *As One Without Authority*. Craddock begins his polemic of denying pulpit authority by elevating listener authority. Allen notes that the goal of Craddock is to create “an experience

⁴ Grant Irven Lovejoy, “A Critical Evaluation of the Nature and Role of Authority in The Homiletical Thought of Fred B. Craddock, Edmund A. Steimle, and David G. Buttrick” (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Seminary, December 1990), 228.

⁵ Allen, 496.

⁶ Ibid.

in the listener which effects the hearing of the gospel.”⁷ Craddock notes that there exists a perception of the congregation’s view of the words chosen to articulate truth as out of date and out of touch, therefore void of authority to change lives.⁸ The words, according to Craddock, need meaning but that meaning is found in the ear of the hearer not the mouth of the preacher. Ronald Allen states, “In 1971, Fred B. Craddock’s groundbreaking book, *As One Without Authority*, became one of the first Homiletical texts to advocate for the authority of the listener.”⁹ The appeal to the frustrated preacher’s desire to find a way out of the monotony that often characterizes propositional preaching is commonplace in the works promoting the New Homiletic.

A second work that served as a foundational source for the New Homiletic is Grady Davis’ *Design for Preaching*. Davis concludes that the absence of a text from a sermon is not a problem, but that the text is one choice among many for the acquirement of a sermon idea. He notes in regards to the preacher’s authority, “He is almost too strongly inclined through piety to accept without question the dogmatic rule that every sermon must have a text from Scripture.”¹⁰ Davis’ work set in motion the movement known as the New Homiletic. His subtle questioning of textual authority, the preacher’s authority, and the role of the congregation in the sermon serves as a foundation for the continual divergence away from authority in the New Homiletic. He states, “Our task is not to extract ‘permanent values’ from outdated material, but rather to discover what the Bible’s message meant to its contemporaries.”¹¹ This statement along with

⁷ Ibid., 509.

⁸ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Missouri: Chalice, 2001), 6.

⁹ Ronald J. Allen, Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnston, *Theology for Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 51.

¹⁰ H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 46.

complimentary assertions throughout his work, removes the preacher, hearer, and sermon away from the text and towards a more experience centered hermeneutic.

The third major work that continues to diminish the value of authority in the New Homiletic is *Homiletic* by David Buttrick. Buttrick's theological convictions emerge from liberal biases. David Schnasa Jacobsen notes, "Buttrick reflects theologically on a text, sometimes explaining and engaging it, and at other times challenging or correcting it (e.g., Matthew's occasional penchant for transactional forgiveness, "if you forgive, God will forgive you")."¹² David Allen highlights Buttrick's theological persuasion by quoting Buttrick's statement on salvation, "[W]e are starting to realize that the gospel is bigger than something called personal salvation ... Clearly the Christian Scriptures see Christ as a cosmic savior; he doesn't just merely save souls, a Gnostic heresy at best: he saves the entire human enterprise, indeed, the universe."¹³ Allen further notes that Buttrick says, "What the Bible offers is narrative with an elaborate mythic beginning-creation and fall, Cain and Abel, Noah's ark, the tower of Babel."¹⁴ Buttrick's theology is liberal, which leads to a methodology void of scriptural mandates or substance.

Buttrick's divergence from propositional preaching began in much the same manner as his emphasis on the starting point of preaching. Both originate from an experience based belief system. He notes, "I grew curious as to how human consciousness actually did conjoin ideas. The result was a journeying system of 'moves' assembled by various 'logics.' When preached,

¹¹ Ibid., 204.

¹² David Schnasa Jacobsen, <http://www.interpretation.org/reviews/oct-04/minor.htm>. Viewed on September 13, 2005.

¹³ Allen, *Two Roads*, 489.

¹⁴ Ibid.

such sermons did seem to heighten attention and retention in surprising ways. More, a mobile system offered freedom to fulfill intention, to alter models in consciousness, in a word, to change minds.”¹⁵ Buttrick vehemently denounces all models of deductive, propositional preaching stating, "Preachers are forced to fabricate some sort of sermon design from their own minds."¹⁶ Buttrick emphasizes a movement in the sermon. He states that the sermon should result in “pacing the movement of a speech with linking blocks of content like a freight train linked with cars to keep all the issues of the message in motion.”¹⁷ Allen notes, “Buttrick's main concern is to effect an experience in the listener.”¹⁸ This experience becomes, for Buttrick and the New Homileticians, the foundation for authority in the sermon.

Buttrick’s argument is designed to establish a foundation in favor of an experience based model of communication, particularly in the pulpit, which is characteristic of the New Homiletic.¹⁹ In a polemic to establish the value of the story of the Christian faith, Buttrick makes us of the “symbolic reflective” aspect of Christianity that is established by Jesus and “the nature of the ‘being saved’ community.”²⁰ This idea that Jesus is a living symbol in the Christian community again has a detrimental impact on the authority of the text. If Jesus is reduced to a religious symbol, then the interpretive experience of the viewer of this symbol becomes the authority and the only valid hermeneutical foundation.

¹⁵ David Buttrick, "On Preaching a Parable: The Problem of the Homiletic Method," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 17 (Winter 1983):18-19.

¹⁶ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 336.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸ Allen, 510.

¹⁹ David Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

A fourth work by Richard Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, again invests much content downplaying the value of propositional preaching. Eslinger's theology presumes that authority is not communicated through propositional truth as much as he does through experience related to the truth.²¹ He notes, "The story of God's self disclosure is prepared in specific stories about concrete human experience."²² This premise is the basis of his theology, namely a belief that God's word is supplemental in nature to man's experience with God's word. This belief is most evident in Eslinger's approach to exegesis, which is more about the exegesis of culture than Scripture. In many of his works, he notes that words have lost their power for today's generation; therefore in order to effectively communicate, the preacher must emphasize experience with God rather than rationally understanding the Word of God.²³

His goal in examining five New Homileticians is to "allow, as much as possible, each homiletician to have a new hearing."²⁴ It is later revealed that this new hearing is more about noting the "liabilities of the old homiletic"²⁵ than highlighting the benefits of the New Homiletic. There is a sense throughout the work that the denigration of the old homiletic's view of authority is more important than promoting the New Homiletic.

A fifth work that is not normally associated with the New Homiletic is increasingly defining the detrimental approach to authority in preaching. Carl Raschke's, *The Next Reformation*, details the end result of much of the work initiated by Davis, Buttrick, and

²¹ Eslinger notes in an email, "My personal theology is strongly shaped by recent post-liberal thought especially as articulated within a narrative theological context." Received Friday, September 23, 2005.

²² Richard Eslinger, *A New Hearing* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 19

²³ See Richard Eslinger, *Pitfalls in Preaching*. Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996; *Narrative and Imagination: Preaching the Worlds that Shape Us*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995; *The Web of Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2002. Each of these works presents the similar theme of a devaluation of words in today's society resulting in a diminishing view of authority in the pulpit.

²⁴ Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

Craddock. Raschke's basic premise is that the anti-authoritarian polemics of the New Homiletic are not historically based in Davis or Craddock, but rather in the Reformation. He notes that we live in a "sensate culture" that will not be reformed by modernist attempts to communicate truth. Raschke perceives the failure of Protestantism is that it "only exchanged the Bible for the church as the source of authority. It did not alter the method of drawing implications from that authority."²⁶ He notes that Luther, Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and others added experience as the primary means by which they communicated truth.²⁷ Raschke believes their actions to eliminate Aristotelian rhetorical components from preaching were purely of a reformation nature and that based on this premise the next reformation will be about faith alone.²⁸

The final source to be examined in order to obtain a clear understanding of the historical foundation of the New Homiletic's view of authority is a compilation of works by Carl F. H. Henry. Henry wrote against the challenges facing Evangelicalism during the same time period that Craddock and Buttrick were launching the New Homiletic. Henry clearly articulated the view that much of what is purported in the New Homiletic is nothing more than liberalism in disguise. Russell Moore indicates that Henry's authorship of *God, Revelation, and Authority*, was the academic force behind the renewal of Evangelicalism in America, and served as Henry's lifelong pursuit "to detail an evangelical theology of propositional revelation and biblical authority."²⁹ Henry spent a lifetime defending the authority of Scripture against liberalism and the constant attacks from secularism. These same principles serve well as a polemic against

²⁶ Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation* (Michigan: Baker, 2004), 93.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 133. Raschke redefines "faith alone" to mean experience alone.

²⁹ Russell D. Moore, "God, Revelation, and Community: Ecclesiology and Baptist Identity in the Thought of Carl F. H. Henry," *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Journal* 4 (Winter 2004): 27.

much of what is espoused as new and better models of preaching today. He notes, “Even some theologians find it more natural to assert their own creative individuality than to accept religious authority.”³⁰

In a 1981 interview, Henry indicated that he believed the greatest challenge among evangelicals in that decade was the problem of biblical authority.³¹ Although the opponents Henry challenged did not go the way of legalism they nonetheless, according to Henry, “dissolved the authority of the written revelation into a vague mysticism.”³² A major catalyst for the intended demise of scriptural authority emerged from Harry Emerson Fosdick and Birney Smith’s removal of the validity of authority and elevation of one’s own subjective experience, which Henry called a compromise to the authority of Scripture and biblical teaching.³³

Henry underscored the need to return to his authoritative view of the text by stating that the primary concern of the day was a recovery of truth, which he believed was best performed in its proclamation.³⁴ He called for a return of the preacher to the intelligibility of revelation against the detraction of truth from the pulpit that was occurring in the New Homiletic.³⁵ Henry defined the role of the preacher as one that clearly stands against the liberal efforts to undermine the authority of divine revelation, and to accomplish this task through a clear, reasoned statement.³⁶

³⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 4, (Waco: Word, 1976), 10.

³¹ Carl F. H. Henry, “The Concerns and Considerations of Carl Henry,” *Christianity Today* 25 (March 13, 1981): 19.

³² Carl F. H. Henry, *Fifty Years of Protestant Theology*, (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1950), 101.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Carl F. H. Henry, *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration*, (Michigan: Baker, 1971), 75.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Henry, *Conversations with Carl Henry: Christianity for Today*, (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1986), 161.

He stated, “Christians have a mandated responsibility for verbal proclamation and rational persuasion.”³⁷ By this proclamation, Henry clearly defined the sermon as, “Nothing less than a re-presentation of the Word of God. Sound preaching echoes and reechoes the gospel.”³⁸ Henry clearly stood in opposition to what the New Homileticians of his day were promoting, namely the weakening of the view of scriptural authority.

Preaching and Authority Defined in the New Homiletic

In defining biblical authority from the perspective of those within the New Homiletic, three areas of discipline must be examined. These are not exhaustive in examining the definition of authority, but provide an analytical view of the matter. The practices of Narrative Preaching, Dialogical Preaching, and a general look at the proponents of the New Homiletic’s view of Biblical Authority comprise the areas of examination.

Authority in Narrative Preaching

Narrative Preaching is somewhat ambiguous in its title. Most often one associates narrative with a story. Narrative preaching is not exclusively limited to a story, but concentrates on plot development. Lowry notes, “Those who advocate narrative preaching typically intend a process involving a plot – whether or not any particular story or narrative is utilized.”³⁹ Narrative preaching places great emphasis on the tension one experiences during a story containing emotional conflict. In analyzing Craddock’s methodology, Allen states, “The sermon becomes a communication event in which the audience, along with the preacher, co-creates the sermonic

³⁷ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 1, (Waco: Word, 1976), 27.

³⁸ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 4, 479.

³⁹ Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 124.

experience. Impartation of knowledge is secondary, even tertiary; affecting an experience is primary in Craddock's approach."⁴⁰ He further states that it is the overriding purpose of the New Homiletic to create an experience for the hearer through narrative, rather than expose them to rational discourse.⁴¹ Paul Warren states, "Authority is not achieved simply by a biblical text . . . authoritative biblical preaching will be that which, kindled by the mind and spirit of Christ in the personal experience of the preacher . . ."⁴² For the New Homiletician, context is not king, rather experience is king.

As with other forms of preaching within the New Homiletic, narrative preaching is founded on an experienced based authority. The text is not the pivotal factor in a narrative sermon. Eslinger states, "Our preaching will assemble plots and perform intentions aligned with the biblical text."⁴³ Usually a narrative sermon will postpone the revelation of content until the end of the narrative. The purpose for this postponement is not to hide information from the hearer, but rather to cause the hearer to desire to receive the climax to the plot. Lowry states, "A narrative sermon is any sermon in which the arrangement of ideas takes the form of a plot involving a strategic delay of the preacher's meaning."⁴⁴

Proponents of narrative preaching claim a biblical foundation for their principles. Eslinger traces the roots of narrative preaching to Scripture, not in the form of scriptural mandate, but in the manner of how "most" Scripture is presented.⁴⁵ Feehan traces the story form

⁴⁰ David Allen, "Two Roads," 509.

⁴¹ Ibid., 510.

⁴² Paul Christopher Warren, "By What Authority?" *Interpretation* 1 (April 1947): 207-218.

⁴³ Richard Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 9.

⁴⁴ William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, ed., *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 342.

of revelation from its original transmission, through its oral dissemination, to written form.⁴⁶ From this trace Feehan concludes that it is within historical Christianity for sermon delivery to take the form of narrative.⁴⁷ Most narrative proponents base their approach to preaching on the experience of man throughout history. Eslinger notes, “Stephen Crites elevates narrativity as the essential mode of human life qua human life.”⁴⁸ The narrative preacher assumes that the connection between all humanity is their own life story, thus preaching is more relational if conducted in narrative fashion. The shared life story of humanity is a base of authority. Key proponents and influencers of narrative preaching include Fred Craddock (*As One Without Authority*), Grady Davis (*Design for Preaching*), Richard Eslinger (*The Web of Preaching*), and Eugene Lowry (*The Homiletical Plot*). Lowry believes, “it was David Randolph who in 1969 named the room beyond the door – calling it the ‘New Homiletic,’ and identifying one of its central emphases: ‘Preaching is understood not as the packaging of a product but as the evocation of an event.’”⁴⁹ This event or plot of emotional preaching is the authoritative heart of narrative preaching.

Narrative preachers do not simply view their craft as a methodology of delivery, but as a theological mandate. In regard to the narrative preacher’s belief about the use of Scripture in expository preaching, Fred Craddock states, “Scriptures can be read in the service for mood or atmosphere or to satisfy those who feel they should be included, but they should not be allowed

⁴⁵ Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, 3.

⁴⁶ James A. Feehan, *Preaching in Stories* (Ireland: Mercer, 1989), 30.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, 5.

⁴⁹ Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 122.

to shackle the minister.”⁵⁰ Consistent with Craddock, most narrative proponents believe experience is the substance of the sermon, above Scripture. Joel Green states that narrative is not merely style, but is theological in its relation to the nature and function of Scripture.⁵¹ The reason for this link between Scripture and narrative preaching is the proponent’s view that experiencing the text is of greater value than propositionally understanding the text. Lowry states, “At worst, propositional thought by its very nature distorts and even reforms the experiential meaning so that it is scarcely recognizable.”⁵² Again, experience is the chief means of authority in narrative preaching.

Lowry notes several elements that are generally regarded as key components of narrative preaching. Those elements include,

the power of narrative to shape . . . the essentially human shape of human experience; the power of story as the primary vehicle of revelation; the significant understanding of the purpose of preaching from conviction by means of rational argument toward transforming event in time by means of participation, identification, and engagement; the changing sense of authority as it relates to the preaching office”⁵³

Eslinger speaks in terms of the sermon as the process of “connecting our stories with The Story.”⁵⁴ He further states that the sermon is designed not to put together ideas, such as propositional truth, but rather to allow the hearer to experience the conflict and resolution of the story.⁵⁵ The narrative sermon proponents will alter the text for functionality. Lowry concludes

⁵⁰ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Missouri: Chalice, 2001), 17.

⁵¹ Joel Green, ed., *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching* (Michigan: Baker, 2003), 37.

⁵² Eugene Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 80.

⁵³ Willimon and Lischer, 344.

⁵⁴ Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

that propositional passages must be reformed by the preacher in order to allow the hearer to experience the text.⁵⁶

Proponents agree that one's method of sermon delivery and one's theology are not mutually exclusive, but are determinate of each other. Henry Mitchell states, "The point to be emphasized here is that sane faith must be born in a reasonable encounter, but it is not born of rational argument."⁵⁷ The theory of the sermon is not as an orderly union of ideas, presented to the hearer, but rather a series of experiences that lead the hearer from the tension of the story to the resolution. Allen, noting Hans Frei states, "Frei insists that the biblical narratives do not 'mean' by referring either to historical facts or to ontological entities. The meaning of the narrative is the narrative! After this is completed, one may raise the question of truth."⁵⁸

Following this form, narrative preachers postpone the delineation of authoritative truth until the hearer completes the experience of the sermon. Ultimately, the experience is the authority.

Eugene Lowry states, "But a sermon is not a logical assemblage; a sermon is an event in time which follows the logic born of the communication interaction between preacher and congregation."⁵⁹ The tension, experience, and conflict resolution combine in narrative to produce the subjective authority of the sermon.

Authority in Dialogical Preaching

⁵⁶ Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 105.

⁵⁷ Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 20.

⁵⁸ David Allen, "Two Roads," 507.

⁵⁹ Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 8.

Dialogical preaching is a homiletical plan that involves the hearer as much as the preacher in regards to not only communication, but also to content. Walter Brueggeman states that the need for a dialogical approach to the sermon is the absence of authority when only one person's (the preacher) voice is heard.⁶⁰ Brueggeman proposes a model of authority that includes the congregation as much as the preacher and the text.⁶¹ Reuel Howe notes, "In a sense it is true that laity have a responsibility to pull the preaching out of the minister by the urgency of their questions . . . and by their regular participation in the worship--preaching dialogue."⁶² For some proponents of Dialogue preaching the authority of the text is subservient to the authoritative experience of the hearer. Stephenson Bond defines the sermon as, "any sermon that draws its text, its interpretation of Scripture, from the relational experience between the story of Scripture and the life context of the listener."⁶³

Dialogical preaching places heavy emphasis on interaction between the pulpit and the pew. It is in this interaction that proponents claim the substance of the sermon is developed and solidified in the hearts of the hearers. James Killen notes the various forms that a dialogue sermon can utilize including: panel discussion involving two or more presenters; ecumenical service with preachers from various disciplines preaching; interview with an expert sharing as he is questioned by one representing the congregation; a shared experience when multiple participants discuss; and a question and answer period either during or after the sermon.⁶⁴ Odis

⁶⁰ Walter Brueggemann, "The Preacher, The Text and The People," *Theology Today* 47 (October 1990), 237-247.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁶² Reuel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching* (New York: Seabury, 1967), 91.

⁶³ D. Stephenson Bond, *Interactive Preaching* (Missouri: CPB, 1991), 5.

⁶⁴ James L. Killen, Jr., "Preaching in Dialogue," *Preaching* 5 (Jul-Aug, 1989): 29-30.

Boiter concludes, “Genuine Dialogue demands that both sides be concerned with serious issues in a spirit of willingness to put forth the needed effort for grappling with them.”⁶⁵

As with other modes of preaching that deviate from propositional truth, proponents of dialogical preaching emphasize a theological mandate for their practice. The bulk of the proponents’ arguments are more a polemic against propositional preaching, rather than a justified defense for dialogue. Howe notes that the weakness of propositional preaching results from its “worldliness and monological character,” from which separation is an act that he understands as a theological foundation supporting dialogical preaching.⁶⁶ Killen presents a theological conviction regarding dialogical preaching as, “a life shaping encounter with the living God is an interaction in which both parties are active.”⁶⁷ Killen further notes that dialogical preaching affects not only the form of the sermon, but he is convinced it plays a key “role in the origins and intentions of a sermon.”⁶⁸ The authority of the sermon is reduced to the value of the dialogue.

Boiter notes two types of dialogical preaching: congregational dialogue and chancel dialogue. Congregational dialogue includes the primary speaker sharing brief content of a text and culminates in an open discussion with the congregation.⁶⁹ The chancel dialogue is normally performed with one primary speaker and then a second person who represents the congregation by posing questions and offering further insight into the discussion.⁷⁰ The key to the method of delivery is audience input. This input may be in the form of questions or in verbal commentary

⁶⁵ Odis D. Boiter, *Dialogue Preaching: A Methodology Among Southern Baptists* (April, 1971), 44.

⁶⁶ Howe, 5.

⁶⁷ Killen, 29-30.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Boiter, 49.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 50.

on the subject posed by the main speaker. Most forms of dialogue include one primary speaker, but he is not viewed as one with authority, but rather as an equal, active participant in the dialogue process. Killen notes, “It is the purpose of preaching to bring people into a life forming meeting with God.”⁷¹ Dialogue proponents believe that the most effective homiletical plan to bring about this meeting with God is a method of sermon delivery that allows the congregation to express their views on equal ground with the preacher. Lischer in commenting on Craddock’s method of preaching, states, “The real authority of the sermon resides in the skill with which the preacher recreates (and validates) the experiences of the hearer.”⁷² He concludes that the goal of the dialogical sermon is to produce authority through a connection between the preacher’s story and the hearer’s experience.⁷³

Authority of Scripture

Some proponents of the New Homiletic claim that scriptural authority is an issue too subjective to define. Markus Barth states, “The authority of the Bible cannot be defined, nor can it be analyzed in a test-tube. It can only be lived – in prayer, in hard work, in cooperation with friends in the service of the church to the world.”⁷⁴ This subjectivity in defining scriptural authority is perpetuated by Craddock, who says, “In a very real sense, the word of God is located not on a page nor on the lips, but at the ear.”⁷⁵ Walter Brueggemann also believes that the issue of biblical authority cannot be settled. He states, “The unsettling and disputatious quality of the

⁷¹ Killen, 20-30.

⁷² Richard Lischer, “The Interrupted Sermon,” *Interpretation* 50 (April 1996): 169-181.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁷⁴ Markus Barth, “The Preacher and the Authority of the Bible,” *Foundations* 2 (July 1959): 234.

⁷⁵ Fred B. Craddock, “The Sermon and the Uses of Scripture,” *Theology Today* (April 1985 – January 1986): 14,

question is, I believe, given in the text itself, because the Bible is ever so endlessly ‘strange and new.’”⁷⁶ Most proponents of the New Homiletic, however, believe that authority can be defined.

The experience based model of authority continues in the New Homiletic in regards to scriptural authority. Raschke indicates that in Paul’s letters, the value contained was not that of a treaty, but the value was in the relational nature of the letters.⁷⁷ According to Raschke the value of the gospels is not in the words of inspired Scripture, but rather the value is in what one might say about the words of Scripture and moreso how those words are applied in life.⁷⁸ John Killinger promotes a premise that calls for a decrease in verbalizing theology and an increase in visualizing theology. He notes, “. . . we could experience God in new ways and in meaningful combinations with the data of our own cultural situation.”⁷⁹ Just as in the practice of dialogical preaching and narrative preaching, the principle of an experience based scriptural authority is central in the New Homiletic.

Many proponents of the New Homiletic’s experience based scriptural authority trace this principle to historical roots, rather than claiming new insight into the issue of authority.

Craddock notes, “The Scriptures are the products of the community’s interpretation and reinterpretation of its own traditions and experiences with God.”⁸⁰ Raschke believes that the experience based model of authority is a reformation principle. He notes, “The singularity of personal belief and the sovereignty of individual conscience were construed almost exclusively

⁷⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Struggling with Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), 5.

⁷⁷ Raschke, 83.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ John Killinger, ed., *The 11 O’Clock News and Other Experimental Sermons*, (New York: Abingdon, 1975), 14.

⁸⁰ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 129.

as religious considerations during the sixteenth century.”⁸¹ Raschke, commenting on the intention of Luther and other reformers, states, “They insisted that individual experience, as well as private interpretation of that experience, could be taken as authoritative, even at the expense of Scripture.”⁸²

Buttrick notes that faith usually precedes any reference to Scripture, thus Scripture is not authoritative, but rather serves as secondary material to the individual’s experience.⁸³ He notes, “Instead of embracing an authority model, perhaps we would do well to return to early rabbinic models and view the Bible as a gift.”⁸⁴ Buttrick concludes that preaching is God’s Word because of the results produced and not because it is essentially biblical.⁸⁵ Nichols also transfers authority from Scripture, but not to the hearer as with Buttrick. Nichols’ transfer of authority is to the preacher. He notes, “God meets man through the preacher, and, when the preacher truly preaches, his preaching is sacramental.”⁸⁶ Craddock and Nichols agree in this transfer, but Craddock poses a warning to the manner in which authority is conveyed through the preacher. He notes, “The ‘ought,’ ‘must,’ and ‘should’ hortatory that still afflicts the American pulpit is inherently in conflict with biblical preaching expressed in a language congenial to the gospel.”⁸⁷ Further commenting on the elimination of authority from the sermon itself, Lowry states, “A

⁸¹ Raschke, 26.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 117.

⁸³ Buttrick, *A Captive Voice*, 21.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁶ Nichols, “Towards a Theological View of Responsibility in Communication,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 3 (Winter 1976): 103.

⁸⁷ Richard L. Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletic Method*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 47.

sermonic idea may be born from various sources, a passage of Scripture, congregational needs, and ethical issues, etc.”⁸⁸ The appearance of these statements is that Craddock, Lowry, and Nichols, as well as Eslinger are at the breaking point of eliminating all authority from preaching. Craddock, in commenting on this cultural influence notes, “No longer can the preacher presuppose the general recognition of her authority as clergy, or the authority of her institution, or the authority of Scripture.”⁸⁹

Perhaps more than any other proponent of the current preaching trends, Buttrick in his *Homiletic*, puts more effort towards the downgrading of authority in preaching. Buttrick notes that the mention of authority in reference to Scripture does not normally refer to specific words on a page, but rather to the Bible’s overall message.⁹⁰ Buttrick brings the authority of Scripture into question based on the various readings from scholars. He notes, “. . . the mere fact of possible scholarly division does question biblical authority.”⁹¹ He further notes, “We not only wrestle with particular notions of ‘authority,’ but with the whole authority model per se.”⁹² Paul Achtemeier does not damage the issue of scriptural authority as much as Buttrick, but nonetheless maintains an experience based model of authority. He notes, “It is the experience of the community of faith with the Bible that gives the basis for the confession of authority of that Bible. Those writings have authority because it has been the experience of the church over the centuries that God uses the words contained in them to carry on his work of sanctifying sinful

⁸⁸ Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 96.

⁸⁹ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 14. Craddock and other proponents of current preaching trends use of the feminine to refer to preachers will not be examined in the limited space of this work. However, their continual use of the feminine in reference to clergy further demonstrates their migration away from the authority of Scripture, which translates to a migration away from all lines of authority within the church.

⁹⁰ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 240.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 243.

people.”⁹³ It is difficult to surmise how non-authoritative words can accumulate into an authoritative experience derived from the same words.

Assumptions of the New Homiletic

It is valuable in this study to understand a few of the assumptions made on the part of the proponents of the above mentioned experience based model of authority. These assumptions led to much of the faulty views of scriptural authority noted above. Returning to the Henry and Frei debate, Hunsinger notes that the assumption of Frei, which is repeated throughout the New Homiletic was, “Frei does not think that cognitive truth is necessarily propositional in form, or more precisely, that propositions are the only proper form of cognitive truth.”⁹⁴ Buttrick assumes that a propositional approach to the text results in a sermon that turns “Scripture into a jail cell rather than a lamp unto our feet.”⁹⁵ His assumption is that a propositionally based sermon is hindered by the text rather than free to proclaim the truth. He states, “Obviously we reject ‘point making’ sermons based on a distilled topic. Such preaching may be chronically unfaithful for it ignores movement, turns texts into ink blots to be read by capricious imagination, and frustrates intentional fulfillment.”⁹⁶ This assumption that preaching is weak due to its propositional nature is prevalent in much of the New Homiletic.⁹⁷

The fundamental assumption of most proponents of the New Homiletic is that propositional preaching is the source of the problem for issues relating to effective

⁹³ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999), 151.

⁹⁴ Hunsinger, 172.

⁹⁵ Buttrick, “Preaching on the Resurrection,” *Religion in Life* 3 (Autumn 1976): 291.

⁹⁶ Buttrick, “Interpretation and Preaching,” *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985): 89.

⁹⁷ See each of the five preachers in Eslinger’s *A New Hearing*. Each spends much space destroying propositional preaching, assuming that it is the propositional nature of preaching that is the problem.

communication, connecting with the audience, and honoring the text. Henry Mitchell assumes that the old homiletic is “preaching which is devoid of life and beholden to a homiletical model based on argument.”⁹⁸ David Allen comments on Craddock’s view of propositional preaching stating, “Craddock believed the churches were saturated with the gospel content and hence traditional (expository) preaching was not getting the job done. The communication of information was counterproductive in a gospel and Bible saturated church community.”⁹⁹ Frei, Buttrick, Mitchell, and Craddock are representatives of the basic assumptions that led to much of the downgrading of authority within the New Homiletic. The result of this assumption that opposes propositional preaching is that it “causes preachers today to seek refuge where the church has always gone in times of secular advance: inward, to the realm of personal certainty.”¹⁰⁰ This personal certainty that emerges from the stated assumptions, results in an experience based model of scriptural authority.

Dangers of the New Homiletic’s View of Scriptural Authority

The outcome of the above stated views of scriptural authority are too numerous to detail in this work, however, several are noted in order to present a brief polemic against the supporters of a devaluation of scriptural authority. Noting the progression of this view of authority, Allen states, “Whatever happens in theology usually happens in homiletics about ten or twenty years later. The homiletician always arrives late to the theological battlefield, often to discover that the last Philistine has been slain!”¹⁰¹ Lischer notes a danger when preaching authority is viewed as

⁹⁸ Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 39.

⁹⁹ Allen, “Two Roads,” 509.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Lischer, “The Interrupted Sermon,” *Interpretation* 50 (April 1996): 173.

¹⁰¹ Allen, “Two Roads,” 497.

the experience of the congregation. He states, “The danger is that the sermon will renounce its genuine authority as the church’s language and merely entertain the hearer with emotionally gratifying stories.”¹⁰² As already demonstrated in this paper, the story in the New Homiletic is the primary means of authority.

Mitchell demonstrates a danger in the New Homiletic by endorsing freedom to read into the text. He notes, “Where there are no details, one must use inspired imagination to put back into the record what was dropped out as unessential to the main issue.”¹⁰³ This rewriting of the text stems from the experiential nature of Mitchell’s homiletic, reaching from the experience of the preacher to the goal of a vicarious experience for the hearer. The danger rests in an absence of limitations related to how much can or cannot be read into the text.

Henry notes the dangers of the challenges facing authority. The end result of these challenges to authority is a misinformed church that cannot discern the dangers of such challenges.¹⁰⁴ Henry went so far as to believe that the constant attack leveled against the issue of authority caused Evangelicalism to “run the risk of bankruptcy by such widespread assignment of divine sanction to erroneous speculations.”¹⁰⁵ Wellum indicates that the lesson we learn in respect to the authority of Scripture from Henry is “to compromise at this crucial point is certain disaster.”¹⁰⁶ Henry noted that many orthodox preachers broke outside the confessional Christianity and began to preach from their own interpretations of Scripture. This divergence,

¹⁰² Lischer, 173.

¹⁰³ Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 46.

¹⁰⁴ Carl F. H. Henry, *Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, (New York: Channel Press, 1957), 7.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen J. Wellum, “Remembering Carl F. H. Henry 1913-2003,” *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Journal* 4 (Winter 2004): 3.

according to Henry, resulted in a failure “to reveal the dimension of the Eternal, of a God who reveals his transcendence in the commonplaces of life.”¹⁰⁷ The breakdown in preaching did not only occur among liberals. Henry challenges many self proclaimed conservatives for diverging from the systematic study of Scripture to a “Jesus only” preaching, which resulted in the training of “enlightened spectators, rather than empowered ambassadors.”¹⁰⁸ Experiential authority results in an absence of power in the proclamation.

In regard to the cultural attacks both from within Evangelicalism and without, Henry notes the expositor must not join ranks with those who, when “at the precise moment the multitudes are most accessible, and when their need is unparalleled, many of the most prominent voices in the Christian community suffer from either evangelistic laryngitis or doctrinal derangement.”¹⁰⁹ It is this absence of a clear word from God that is the greatest danger in the experience based model of scriptural authority.

John Killinger’s efforts deteriorate the clear exposition of the text by elevating the experience of the hearer to the preacher’s foremost thoughts in sermon preparation. Killinger suggests that relaxation exercises, and free dance movement can sometimes go “much deeper than mere verbal relationship.”¹¹⁰ Obviously, he is at the far extreme of those who follow current trends, but nonetheless demonstrates where an elimination of biblical authority will eventually lead. He notes that in the end, “really great preaching is – a vision of one person’s freedom

¹⁰⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, “Crisis in the Pulpit,” *Christianity Today* 18 (July 4, 1965): 24.

¹⁰⁸ Joel A. Carpenter, ed., *Two Reformers of Fundamentalism: Harold John Ockenga and Carl F. H. Henry*, (New York: Garland, 1988), 50.

¹⁰⁹ Carl Henry, *Faith at the Frontiers*, (Chicago: Moody 1969), 48.

¹¹⁰ John Killinger, *Experimental Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 23.

shared with another.”¹¹¹ Beliefs such as that displayed by Charles Bartow often emerge as a result of this weakening of views regarding the primacy of Scripture. Bartow notes, “The word ‘truth’ there, of course, means authenticity or sincerity, not simply literal accuracy.”¹¹² For the participant in current preaching trends, truth becomes more about the hearers’ connection with the message than with the inherent authority or authenticity of the text itself.

Craddock notes that an alternative to historical preaching models is one in which “thought moves from the particulars of experience that have a familiar ring in the listener’s ear to a general truth or conclusion.”¹¹³ Craddock further notes that the experiences of people are central to the formation of the sermon, and he takes his case to the point of surmising that the “experiences and viewpoints of the listeners constitute a part of the experience of the Word of God in the sermon.”¹¹⁴ Craddock’s dangerous contribution to preaching catapults man’s experience as the primary hermeneutic in interpretation, and exalts man to the central figure in the preaching moment. Should one follow his suggestions, the sermon will simply translate a message already experienced by man and eliminate the revelation of propositional truth.

Conclusion

Often in the current preaching trends, a migration away from an authoritative view of Scripture is much more subtle than the aforementioned cases. Fred Craddock’s theory of preaching undermines any remnant of a conservative view of scriptural authority, but

¹¹¹ Killinger, *11 O’clock News*, 24.

¹¹² Charles Bartow, *The Preaching Moment*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 34.

¹¹³ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, (Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 47. This work has been frequently noted as the catalyst for an experience-based sermon and is viewed by this author as the work that sought to dismantle the propositional, axiomatic nature of Henry’s epistemology and preaching theory.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

accomplishes such in a manner that often bears the appearance of a less intrusive force on propositional truth. Craddock suggests that every preacher should pose the question, “How does Scripture function in a sermon?”¹¹⁵ To the novice expositor this question appears foundational in preaching theory. But Craddock’s question leads, when combined with the totality of his theory, to a realignment of the process of sermon development. His theory moves away from a truly authoritative text as a starting point in preaching, and causes the preacher to begin with the sermon in mind rather than the text. This divergence is detrimental because it results in the text serving the sermon rather than the sermon serving the text.

Some proponents of the current trends in preaching are not as subtle as Craddock in their denial of the axiomatic foundation of divine revelation. Buttrick notes that to reduce Christianity to a series of propositional truths eliminates what New Testament faith ultimately means.¹¹⁶ He follows the divergence of many within his camp away from clear interpretation of propositional truth. This divergence ultimately leads to a mystical examination of the text that is dependent on the experience of each individual. The obvious detriment to preaching that this trend poses is an elimination of any possibility of discovering objective meaning.

Richard Eslinger voices a primary polemic against propositional truth that many within the current preaching trends follow. He notes, “There is a crisis in language, a diminution in the ability of words to express potency.”¹¹⁷ Eslinger further notes that the shift in homiletic trends was from formulating ideas to putting in order experiences.¹¹⁸ Eslinger’s detrimental contributions to the denigration of propositional truth include a questioning in the expositors

¹¹⁵ Fred Craddock, “The Sermon and the Uses of Scripture,” *Theology Today* (April 1985-January 1986): 9.

¹¹⁶ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 265.

¹¹⁷ Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching*, 18.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

mind as to the validity of words containing meaning in the text as well as a migration away from examining the propositional truth and turning to providing an overview of the experiences of the original hearers. If his premise is that words are in constant transition as far as meaning, and that proclaiming experiences rather than ideas is the best method to communicate, then the detrimental result of Eslinger's premise is a progressive migration away from both propositional truth and from revelation.

Following in the pattern of Craddock, Eslinger, and Killinger, Eugene Lowry espouses what this paper considers the greatest threat to the degeneration of scriptural authority in the New Homiletic. Lowry, like all within his camp, must call for the insertion of propositions within the message, for one cannot escape the propositional nature of communication, even within a narrative context. But Lowry, citing Robert Roth, states that the proposition only enters in an ancillary way and that "meaning arises from the experience of personal involvement in dramatic action."¹¹⁹ If Lowry's view of propositional truth fully matures, the sermon developed from his premise will merely entertain revelation as a homiletic consideration rather than ground the sermon in objective, propositional truth from which all authority in preaching is derived.

¹¹⁹ Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 12.

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