

A Book Review (Reaction Paper):
The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority

I. SUMMARY

Samuel D. Proctor's book promises to offer much. The publisher calls Proctor, "one of the deans of preaching in the African American church, has responded to the ongoing demand for a "how-to," step-by-step approach to powerful sermon development ... Proctor offers his own view of the traditional dialectical method of sermon preparation, one which includes a thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in dealing with a timely topic" (Back Cover). With an endorsement like that, I was hopeful that I could glean valuable material to help me in my quest to be an improved expository preacher. I was woefully let down. Truth in advertising fails again.

In the author's own words, the purpose of this book is, "an effort to promote preaching that will introduce and sustain people in fulfilling religious experience, a relationship with God that enhances every dimension of life, and a discipleship to Jesus that provides a paradigm for the daily application and praxis of that relationship" (pg. 16-17). It is a book from the liberal persuasion about the methods of preaching, especially for those who do not incorporate any current method. The author tries to answer the question, "how does one go about preparing a sermon?", with six straightforward chapters, which are entitled, "Getting Started," "The Proposition and the Subject," "The Antithesis," "The Thesis," "The Relevant Question," and "The Synthesis", but he never explains with clarity how to actually prepare a sermon. Again, this short work seems to be on the right target with provocative chapter titles, but unfortunately it

veers away from what a biblical exposition should be (deductive vs. inductive) and how it actually is “built.”

II. ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

1. Strengths and Weaknesses.

As much as I did not like or agree with this book, there are nuggets of truth found on occasion. The problem is that these truths are in the context of liberalism. The statements made by the author, in context, are actually detrimental to his cause. In other words, the following quotes are excellent, but they are made null and void by their liberal context (“Preaching prepares persons for such because it deals with life’s extremities without apology. Preaching is different because it has the audacity to ask us to live as though we had to report to God at any moment” (p. 16), “faithful study of the text” (p. 19), and “... there must be one message sorts of variations are invited, there must be made to stand out with a clear presentation of an antithesis somewhere in the sermon” (p. 680). These statements essentially are just words and serve no purpose to an expositor.

I did appreciate his desire to convey a remedy to the constant struggle that I have (and many other expositors have too), that is, the sermon should have “one consuming idea, one driving proposition” (p. 19). This is to say, Proctor wants all biblical messages to ask, and answer, “... why this sermon?” (p. 28), or “So what?” (p. 40). All too often this unifying thesis or argument is not apparent to all who listen to the gospel herald. For this, I commend the author and I want to incorporate his ideas into my sermons on a regular basis.

Additionally, the evangelical community can learn diligence and the hard work ethic found in many liberal preachers, such as Proctor. I tend to work harder at the exegesis than I do

with the method in which I say things. Proctor implores the reader saying, “on the other hand, preachers are heard to say that they have no method at all except to open their mouths and let God fill them. This is often a vain and arrogant rationalization for sloth and laziness” (p. 31). I do not think I am lazy in my study, but I do tend to rationalize my sermon structure and the way I say things when I am running short of time (which happens regularly).

Unfortunately, this book contains more weaknesses than strengths. For a “how-to” book it is not very specific and it doesn’t give the typical, methodological approaches that most preaching books of this sort would offer. It seems more philosophical to me, but even more than that, it appears that this book is more based from the author’s lectures and classroom discussion about preaching, rather than a book that sets out the process or scheme of actually preaching a sermon.

This paperback is replete with liberal buzz-words and theology. He calls God “a Power outside of ourselves” (p. 42), endorses the typical liberal preachers like Fosdick (“... in the clarion preaching of Harry Emerson Fosdick”) (p. 29), and gives accolades to liberal, theological reference material (regarding the Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Proctors says, “It is fair to the people to use a commentary that honors and respects sound scholarship and not one that brings a biased point of view to the literature of the Bible”) (p. 36). What a loaded statement that is!

Another area of divergence with the author is with his insistence and focus upon the social gospel. It is not even a hidden agenda with Proctor, rather it is bold and direct. He says, “It is this: ‘Jesus is our spiritual leader because he challenges us to go father in our compassion, our inclusiveness, and in our commitment to do the will of God’” (p. 84), and “How are we going to tear down the walls that divide us?” (p. 102). Additionally, and sadly, “ism” language pervades this book both directly and indirectly, such as, “The stakes are high, and the prizes we

seek are precious indeed. God has revealed in Jesus Christ a paradigm of personal, spiritual, moral, and social excellence; also the high promises of human potential in Christ call us to strive toward a genuine community to supplant our hatreds, our racism, our tribalism, our classism, our sexism, and our idolatrous nationalism” (p. 2-3). This theology comes to a climax when he says that preaching is “... to present the claims of Christ in our personal lives and the claims of the kingdom of God in social terms with such clarity and conviction that this creeping tribalism and racism would be seen receding before the rising tide of real community. The sad fact is that too many preachers find their security hiding behind a bibliolatry...” (p. 15). In fact, Proctor himself is hiding behind neo-orthodoxy and a social hermeneutic.

My strongest area of disagreement with Proctor is with his idea that the sermon is an “encounter”. What is an “encounter”? How do we get the congregation to have one? These are all questions he never answers, but he talks this way so often that I wish he would have explained this ethereal “encounter” and not assumed I knew what he was talking about. For example, the author says, “It is the God-human encounter on which the Bible reports that we are searching for an that lies beneath, behind, and all through the printed word. That encounter goes on ... It was the encounter that caused the Bible to be produced” (p. 6), “It is the encounter that makes it a book of religious authority...” (p. 70), “This weekly pause to celebrate our faith and to receive a twenty- to thirty-minute homily on the God-human encounter is a fixed aspect of the culture” (p. 1), and “... the Bible is the long record of the God-human encounter, and that encounter goes on today!” (p. 78). Maybe a chapter title for revision could be “What does the Preacher do to have the congregation encounter an “encounter”? Maybe this explains why he doesn’t like “points”!

2. How is the Author's Approach to Preaching Similar or Different from My Heritage and Conviction (theologically, hermeneutically, and stylistically).

The author seems antithetical to every approach I have and believe in. My first clue was his use of the NRSV version of the Bible. Shortly after that, he advocates lectionary preaching, in terms of a schedule and amazingly believes that, "... one should allow that the Spirit was guiding those who prepared the lectionary in the first place and that the total exercise is one on which God has breathed" (p. 38). I could not disagree more. Once we are on different playing fields when it comes to Bibliology, then where else can we agree on approach? He further reveals his low view of Scripture saying, "Many preachers feel that something is violated if the preacher does not honor God's Word by beginning with the Book, but we need a bigger God than that. God is active and alive now as well as before and during the time the Bible was written" (p. 78). What a travesty. If his true colors are not apparent so far, let Proctor speak for himself in black and white, "I fear that the Bible itself becomes the object rather than the God about whom the Bible speaks or the Christ who gives it meaning" (p. 80). In a sense, this is correct, but within the liberal mindset of this book, this is totally unacceptable and why bother preaching if it is true? Won't an encounter do?

To further complicate matters in a negative fashion, he sees no real differentiation between special and natural revelation, saying, "... as well as God's truth found in logic, history, biology, mathematics, biography, poetry, drama, and in all the magic and mystery of the natural order – for Jesus promised that new truth would be given and that the Comforter would lead us to such new truths" (p. 9). If this is so, then I think he should have included a chapter on how to listen to a sermon in the park or wildlife reserve. I preach God's special revelation because I

have a mandate to do so (2 Tim. 4:1 ff.). Isn't general revelation supposed to reveal God (Rom. 1)?

3. This Book's Vital Contribution to the Rationale of My Ministry.

There is something to the "art" aspect of preaching that intrigues me. Proctor states, "When it flows with rhythm and melodious cadences, it is very close to music. Occasionally it is argumentative, persuasive, and imperative ..." (p. 7). While I might differ with the "imperative" comment, I will acquiesce to the "flow" aspect of what the author is purporting. I want to further explore and study this philosophy and see if I can work it into my sermons from an evangelical point of view.

The contribution that this book gives to the ministry entrusted to me is negligible. In fact, it further inspires me to guard my church against this very theology and methodology. The trust that the Lord Jesus has given to me must be guarded by exposing the false teachers, false teachings, and the Word itself, and by teaching sound doctrine that comes directly from the Word.

4. Elements of Discussed Preaching that I intend to Employ.

The proof is in the pudding they say, and Proctor shows the fruit of his liberalism and bad theology in one of his sermons, entitled, "Jesus Goes Farther" (p. 103). I couldn't think of a worse display of liberal tripe that is not even biblical, rather, it is mere moralism.

The only thing I will use this book for is to teach others the errors of black, liberal theology. For example, when discussing the "Call to the Ministry", I will quote Proctor when he says, "Until one's dying day, a preacher will not know absolutely that this call is from God" (p.

7), and then I will tell my students that he couldn't be more wrong. I think the issue with that statement is that he himself was not called to the gospel ministry so he cannot identify it.

Additionally, I think I will use the William Cowper poem on page 123, entitled "Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?"

When I asked Dr. York why he assigned this book, he said he likes to stay current on black preaching. That made me feel better about reading a liberal book on preaching, that on the surface, offers little. May God burn a desire in the black community to faithfully proclaim God's Word, rightly divided, and from a conservative, evangelical "slant."