“The Preacher as Self-Consuming Artifact: Paul, Corinth, and a Homiletic of Eccentricity”

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In 1972, the American man of letters and legal scholar, Stanley Fish, published an influential study entitled *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*. In it he argued that literary artifacts are sometimes the opposite of what they seem: they purport to convey truth in linear and logical fashion, but in the end contradict themselves, subvert their own intentions, and reveal their own inability to articulate what they propose. “A self-consuming artifact,” writes Fish, “signifies most successfully when it fails, when it points away from itself to something its forms cannot capture.”

John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, for example (published in 1678), purports to show a brave and sometimes solitary pilgrim by the name of Christian making “progress” — as the book’s full title declares — “from this world to that which is to come.” But things are hardly as they seem: far from making progress in any conventional sense, Christian is beset by doubt and despair throughout the length of his pilgrimage. Even as he passes at last through the river that stands between him and the gate of the Eternal City, he is overwhelmed by doubt, fear, and the vivid memory of his many sins. In the end, the book is not only not about “progress,” it is not about its pilgrim either: rather, Bunyan’s true subject is the reader, whose own spiritual state is to be exposed in the course of reading this text.

Notwithstanding the controversy it has occasioned, Fish’s analysis surely grasps something essential to the inner workings of Christian piety generally, and not only in its seventeenth-century expression. Other authors whom Fish examines — John Donne and George Herbert in particular — share with Bunyan the essential conviction that their works (however sometimes self-preoccupied) are nonetheless not self-referential, much less self-substantiating, but are rather exocentric and allocentric: centred on something, someone very much greater than the texts and authors themselves. That key insight into the nature of Christian confession brings us to another author — the apostle Paul — to the intent of his texts, and to the contemporary task of understanding and expounding them. For Paul, it turns out, has something similar to say about the eccentric and allocentric task of Christian proclamation: “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5). Preachers — present company included — may well be eccentric, in any number of senses. But

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¹The reading of Paul’s homiletic offered here is set out more fully in Michael P. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).


Paul’s claim in this passage is less psychological or sociological than theological. For, the apostle insists, he and all who preach like him are likewise “self-consuming artifacts,” examples and articulations of a truth they can neither fully embody nor fully express. They do not possess the truth: the truth (and more particularly, “the truth of Christ,” 2 Cor 11:10) possesses them. Or if we may play on the metaphor of redemption: what qualifies preachers to speak is not that they have a purchase on religious truth so much as that Truth has purchased them. Preachers point away from themselves, beyond themselves to a larger reality that shapes the words they speak, forms the consciousness these words give voice to, and fashions the lives such consciousness calls into conformity with Christ.

In such terms Paul explains his own and every homiletician’s task:

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture — “I believed, and so I spoke” — we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. (2 Cor 4:6-14)

Whether we entirely believe him or whether he is entirely successful in this programme of theological self-effacement may be debated. Paul does on occasion draw attention to himself, even as he sometimes boasts about his life and ministry while steadfastly claiming to do nothing of the sort. But the point at stake is the principle itself, rather than the perfection of its performance.

What Paul argues, both here and throughout Second Corinthians, is that Christian faith, Christian ministry, and therefore Christian preaching in particular are all captured by and drawn into conformity with the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is, the experience of Jesus (with subjective genitive) determines our experience of Jesus (objective genitive). We are, he declares, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh... so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.

How has Paul come to this conclusion? Ironically, on the basis of his own personal experience! Christ’s death and resurrection have always been central to Paul’s thinking and theology. They have forensic significance: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the
ungodly... God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us... Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God” (Rom 5:6-10). So Jesus’ death and resurrection are about weakness, wrath, and sin on the one hand, but justification, righteousness, and salvation on the other. But the abasement and exaltation of Jesus are also about moral transformation: “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Then, third, Christ’s death and resurrection are about future glory: they have an eschatological significance: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5). So for Paul there is simultaneously a soteriological, an ethical, and an eschatological dimension to Jesus’ cross and empty tomb.

None of that has changed. But something happens to Paul between his first and second letters to Corinth, some time in the mid- to late-fifties CE, as he must now explain to his congregants there:

We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again. (2 Cor 1:8-10)

While we can only guess at the nature of this “affliction,” the lesson Paul draws from it is unmistakable, for the same letter begins on this very note:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. (2 Cor 1:3-5)

From his affliction in Asia, Paul discovers that Christ’s death and resurrection are not only of forensic, ethical, and eschatological significance; they also provide the experiential pattern for God’s rescue and consolation of his servants in the midst of present persecution and personal suffering. Again:

We felt that we had received the sentence of death — so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again... (2 Cor 1:9-10)

Paul and his companions were overwhelmed to the point of being crushed; they despaired of life, yet find themselves alive, causing Paul to conclude that their experience follows the pattern of Christ on the cross and thereafter. Crucifixion and resurrection, affliction and consolation, death and new life as Christ’s own experience forms the basic pattern for their experience of Christ.

If this is, in its most basic form, the ministry of Christ on behalf of others, so it becomes the pattern of Paul’s ministry on Christ’s behalf. “We have this treasure,” he explains — the treasure “of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” — “in clay jars” —
fragile vessels, vulnerable and subject to affliction. On the one hand, explains the apostle, “We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5). Death, says Paul, is at work in us preachers, fragile and fallible vessels whom no one could accuse of glory or power, theologically insubstantial and self-consuming artifacts who point beyond ourselves to someone greater. And on the other hand, says the apostle, “We speak because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus” (2 Cor 4:14). It is this double movement of self-effacement, self-abasement and self-abandonment to the death of Jesus, of yielding to the life and new creation of Christ’s resurrection, that makes it possible to speak of, in, and for Christ:

Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3:5-6)

What, then, might this double conformity to death and resurrection mean for the ministry of preaching? What might it mean for homiletics, whether in theory or praxis, as both taught and practised in our present context? Here I want, first of all, to take literally Paul’s declaration that “We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4:5). For in this consists the eccentricity of apostolic preaching, insofar as all preaching is allocentric and Christocentric — centred on Christ.

First, then, what preaching is not. Paul’s “not ourselves” implies, first, that preaching is not — despite Phillips Brooks’ famous declaration — “Truth through Personality.” If it is “not ourselves,” then preaching is not about compelling eloquence, persuasive rhetoric, good looks, personal charm, or pastoral authority. It is not to be undertaken for the purpose of self-promotion, much less self-fulfillment. It’s not about having one’s name in lights, even the tiny lights of a parish notice board. Neither is Christian proclamation primarily concerned with church growth, denominational drum-beating, or cultural affirmation — however much it may be denominationally bounded and culturally specific. It cannot submit to, cannot be captured by the social, cultural, or political ideologies either of left or right. For it proclaims Jesus, not Caesar, to be Kyrios, “Lord.” Otherwise the gospel is reduced to little more than a reflection of our own prior identity, instead of Christ’s “new creation.” As preachers we are responsible for conducting exegesis, finding illustrations, and delivering sermons in particular languages, particular churches, and particular cultural contexts, yet none of these provide the reason or grounds for speaking.

So if it “ain’t about us,” what are some possible implications of what I have called “eccentric,” off-centred preaching; preaching “Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake”?

Self-evidently, Paul’s homiletic is inescapably focused on Christ and the cross, by which not only the preacher’s message or theology, but also the preacher’s personal experience and

discipleship are interpreted via the foundational categories of death and resurrection. Paul sees the principles of human frailty — even death — and divinely-given life simultaneously at work in his own experience: in repeated rescue from hardship and persecution, in his own boldness and trust of God despite overwhelming odds, even in the effectiveness of his ministry amidst converts who actively oppose him.

Paul’s challenge to preachers of the gospel is therefore that we continually seek to discern the contours of impending death and divine renewal within our own lives. To be a preacher is to look for patterns of grace (and our continuous need of grace) both in Scripture and in personal experience. Like Paul himself, preachers are examples of the gospel as much as speakers of the gospel.

This means that to preach Christ is, like the life of faith in general, essentially an exercise in yielding oneself to God, trusting God to bestow an unearned and unrepayable gift of life. Preaching is an expression of the preacher’s own trust and hope in Christ; it proceeds from the experience of grace and expresses dependence on grace in the very act of speaking.

Accordingly, the purpose of preaching is to testify to the mercy and compassion of God in such a way as to invite one’s congregation to find that same mercy for themselves. It avoids coercion and invites trust — but not so much in the speaker as in a God who raises the dead.

This implies that Christian proclamation does not exalt the preacher above his or her audience, but rather establishes them on the same level, because are all equally dependent upon God’s mercy and God’s grace — together “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — so long as [Paul adds] we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17).

Furthermore, I want to argue that preaching after the manner of Paul involves both silence and bold courage in speaking. The preacher is not silent because of theological timidity, or concern for alienating one’s hearers, but because even Jesus — the very Word of God — falls silent on the cross. Yet because it is governed by the cross, such silence is neither final nor absolute: it is a temporary and provisional silence, ultimately reversed by its direct dependence upon the full dimensions of God’s self-articulation in the person of Jesus, both crucified and risen. The preacher’s initial silence is an act of intentional contingency that precedes bold testimony to a glorious and risen Christ.

As implied already, this approach has important — if unexpected — implications for homiletic methodology. For it suggests that the efficacy of Christian proclamation derives less from methodology than from theology. Objectively and externally, Paul’s preaching is made effective less by what Paul himself undertakes than by the action of God in effecting the consolation and renewal to which the apostle bears witness. Christian proclamation is predicated less on principles of structure, rhetoric, or epistemological appeal than on spirituality; and more particularly the preacher’s accession and self-abandonment to the death-creating, life-renewing, self-articulating activity of God.
Finally, even as preachers must first be caught up by and become subject to Christ in order to speak of Christ to others, so faithful preaching is marked by the transformation of its hearers. Again, this is not a result of the speaker’s personal authority or skill in speaking, but of the fact that God remains faithful in continuing to act according to the pattern of Jesus’ cross and resurrection. The final test of faithful preaching is the fact that preacher and hearers alike are changed by the saving action of God to which such preaching testifies. They are conformed both individually and corporately to the pattern of Jesus’ own death and vindication, and express in their lives together the contours of God’s new creation and new humanity. Preaching is thus attended by “glory” — not in any immediate cultural sense, but glory defined by the character of God, and by the transformation that results from knowing and yielding to a characteristically gracious Saviour.

Conclusion

We live in a culture — particularly a religious culture — that values social status, success, and personal well-being, and tends to downplay anything more negative as unworthy of Christ. Here Paul offers us a paradoxical word of reassurance and hope. The many reversals that typically characterize the life of faith (whether the preacher’s own or that of the congregants) indicate neither lack of faith on their part nor lack of blessing on the part of God. Rather, Paul proposes that these are the normal conditions of discipleship from which faithful testimony and proclamation arise. Reversals are not ends in themselves so much as occasions for grace, opportunities for acknowledging the proper limitations of human endeavour, and for yielding to the faithfulness of Christ. According to Jesus’ example, which Paul himself imitates, only by embracing the cross do we become open to the resurrection; only by taking up our cross and following the crucified Messiah do preachers begin to understand, to model, and to lead their hearers toward the life of Christ. This is the blessing — the homiletic, even — that Paul offers both to his hearers in Corinth and to us:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. (2 Cor 1:3-5)