

The Homiletic of ALL Believers

By O. Wesley Allen, Jr.¹

Excerpts and [Comments](#) by William H. Gross – Colorado Springs CO 2006

The church exists to equip the saints for the ministry of the gospel. To equip the saints, there must be a dialogue, an exchange of information that is progressive and interactive. Too often we fall into impersonal dictation instead of personal interaction. And too often there is a de facto clergy-laity distinction that precludes active and vital discourse. So here are some rules of the road as we engage one another on the Journey. Wesley Allen's book is primarily directed to pastors as an innovative approach to homiletic. However, in the church culture we desire, one in which each believer is a participant in the "conversation," the rules and attitudes described here are as meaningful and useful to the congregation, lay leaders, evangelists, and apologists as they are to the pastor. Our conversation is internal among believers and external with non-believers. I have excerpted those portions of the book that address this wider conversation of the church.

Sermons and Conversation

In the modern Enlightenment worldview, truth is understood as absolute and universal. If it is true here and now, it is true everywhere and always. Reason is given the highest respect in the process of discerning such universal truth. Truth is no longer seen as divinely revealed from on high, but is objectively discovered from below.

In cultural postmodernism, however, this Enlightenment approach to the world has been overturned to some degree. It isn't a wholesale rejection of Enlightenment epistemology, but it is a serious shift nevertheless. More and more, people in Western culture view truth as particular, local, and thus relative; they are comfortable with multiple truths, with competing truths. Reason is no longer the sole authority for determining truth. It has been coupled with and limited by individual and communal experience, thus stripping the power from any grand narrative to define the worldview of all. Instead, individuals work to construct cohesive worldviews for themselves. They are neither authoritative for nor verifiable by others.

Sharon Parks says that citizens of the postmodern world are less concerned with the task of looking for and finding meaning, than they are about the task of "making meaning." The progression has moved from "What is the meaning of life?" to "What is the meaning of *my* life?" to "Is there any meaning to life?" and in postmodernism, the answer is, "The only meaning in life is the meaning *I make of my* life." P. 4

What is the Church to do in a day when grand truth narratives are rejected? How can we speak of creation and exodus and prophecy and incarnation and resurrection and eschaton in a day when truth is considered relative to context, and when institutions that want to say more are viewed with suspicion? Preachers could take a stance against postmodernism using an evangelistic approach that hopes to convert our listeners from relative wandering to standing firm on the universal truth of the gospel. "To do so, however, is to risk going the hegemonic route of

¹ O. Wesley Allen Jr., *A Homiletic for All Believers* (Westminster Knox Press, Louisville KY, 2005)

fundamentalism in the modern period and traveling backwards in time instead of responding to the present and participating in the shaping of the future.” P. 5

Dictating the Conversation

What if the sermon was not a monologue, but it was still conducted by the preacher? Except in a very small congregation, the time allotted for a sermon within the worship service rarely allows for the intimate evolution of ideas and emotions that occurs in authentic conversations between two or more people. Moreover, the preacher remains at the authoritative center of the dialogue as individuals in the congregation talk to him or her instead of truly being in conversation. He still controls the conversation by the choice of subject matter and observations. He dictates the questions that will be asked by establishing the topic and making the points.

For true give-and-take conversations in a roundtable, the number of participants probably should not exceed fifteen. **Thus small groups are essential components of the church’s conversation.** But in the larger body, the leader, or preacher, must abandon a sovereign homiletic in which he or she stands above the listeners in a hierarchical, authoritarian relationship, offering the sermon as a mandate. The preacher must also move beyond dialogue, narrative, and inductive modes of preaching. These do attempt to address the hierarchical problems of sovereign preaching by attending to the experience of the hearers, but nevertheless, they assume that there is a symmetry of experience shared by preacher and hearer that can preclude the “otherness” of the hearers.

To do this, there are dynamics to a roundtable conversation that have to be taken into account when a conversational monologue is presented. Being true to these dynamics will include *describing* elements of the conversation at times, and at other times *imitating* those elements. In other words, as the preacher speaks for others in his presentation (moving it out of monologue and into conversation), he must speak with their voice. He is not shaping the conversation as a lone-ranger exegete, always speaking from his or her own perspective, but respectfully offering up the contributions of others with a true voice.

The tentative and open-ended quality of conversational preachers’ interpretations will fund the hearers’ and the preacher’s struggles to make meaning of their lives and of the world in a less hierarchical fashion than earlier theories of preaching. But it is not clear that the congregation ever actually engages in *real* conversations in this model. At best, individuals in the congregation use the sermon to fund an interior conversation among themselves. Even though the preacher proposes tentative interpretations of Scripture as the goal of the sermon, they are the focus of any follow-up questions, corrections, or counter-proposals. We get the impression that without the sermon, the church would have no conversations at all.

Without conversations in the church where the congregation is struggling to proclaim the gospel already, there is no occasion at all for a sermon. **It begins first in the congregation, and then moves to the pulpit.** If the emphasis in a true conversational homiletic is on the ongoing conversations in the church, then the preacher must focus more on how preaching week after week, year after year, participates in these conversations instead of focusing so much on the individual sermon as the occasion for the conversation. pp. 6-14

A Conversational Ecclesiology

Since the time of Luther, the metaphor “Word of God” has been reserved for Christ, the Bible, and preaching. But this has equated the preacher’s voice with Christ’s and the Bible, and that is a false equation if the preacher’s voice *alone* is to be equated with them. Other forms of proclamation practiced by the church (e.g. music, art, social action, charity, prayer, Sunday School, colleges, seminaries, and missions) are seen as being subordinate to and originating in the proclamation that issues from the pulpit. At best, such a view places the laity as mediators, standing between the ordained preacher and the world. They are reduced to the role of dealers in second-hand proclamation.

To reserve for the ordained preacher the right and responsibility to proclaim Christ, however, distorts a biblical view of the community as a composite of baptized persons endowed with a range of spiritual gifts that are to be used for the building up of the church, its members, and the world in which the church resides. In reality, the church and its members proclaim the gospel in a myriad of ways. Preaching is but one method of proclamation, standing alongside (not above) all of the other methods.

A better understanding of God’s gifts of proclamation is that proclamation flows out of the central act of the church’s witness. The central act of the church’s witness is simply the *gathering* of the community as the body of Christ. The New Testament term for church is just that – gathering, assembly (*ecclesia*). If proclamation flows out of the act of gathering, then it flows *through* everyone who gathers. And if everyone is proclaiming, then the emphasis in a theology of proclamation shifts from a monological funnel (from Christ through the Bible through the preacher to the congregation and to the world) to a conversational ecclesiology in which the gospel moves back and forth among the gathered community. It is in the form of statements and questions, and in the form of yes and no. In other words, the priesthood of all believers should include a *homiletic of all believers*.²

Churches that continue to dictate truth authoritatively from above, in a world where meaning is more and more constructed experientially from below, are doomed to a future of speaking only to those who turn to and hold onto the historic faith primarily out of fear of the ambiguities of postmodern relativity.³ The authority to describe God, to explore the human condition and God’s response to it, and to declare what it means to be Christian (individually) and the church (communally) in the world must be shifted out of the mouth of the preacher and into mouths of the community of faith as a whole if the Christ faith is to serve as a resource for those struggling to make meaning in today’s postmodern culture. P. 18-19

John B. Cobb argues that one of the errors that the twenty-first century church must correct is the twentieth-century church’s turning over of theology to the university. This professionalization of theology has created a gap between theology and church life (i.e. between reflection and praxis) that leads the church into “decadence.” One might say that academic Christian theology has had

² It might be helpful to distinguish between proclaiming the gospel and witnessing to its effectiveness. The one is external and objective and it is Biblically dictated (Romans), while the other is internal and subjective and personally experienced or evidenced (James); the one is the cause of our natural transformation (salvation), and the other is its visible effect (sanctification). This takes it beyond the words of a sermon or a gospel presentation, and moves it into the testimony of the wider church that what has been said is true and effectual in a practical way.

³ Allen seems to be suggesting here that we embrace postmodernism, rather than adapting our message to it. I believe that would be a mistake.

little to do with defining or being defined by real-life, on-the-streets and in-the-pews Christianity. Conversely, one might also claim that real-life Christianity has had little to do with engaging in serious Christian theology. Cobb argues that neither situation should exist.

He suggests that the solution begins with congregations, not with the academy. It requires that church people recognize that unless we reflect seriously, as Christians, about who we are and what we are called to be, we continue to drift into decadence. It also requires that instead of being driven to despair, we begin the process of reflection involving as many of our people as possible. P. 19-20

Because all in the body of Christ have spiritual gifts (Rom 12:3-8; 1Cor 12), and there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal 3:28), the distinction between laity on the one hand and clergy and academicians on the other must be removed when it comes to the task of *doing* theology and proclaiming the faith. Having a Master of Divinity does not mean one has truly mastered divinity. Being ordained does not make one more closely related to God than others. While important, education and ordination do not grant one deeper perspective into life than others have, do not guarantee one more authentic experiences to be shared than others have, do not insure one more correct views on the nature of the universe than others. The full membership of the church, from youth to the aged, from the poor to the privileged, may not be able to read Mark in the original Greek, or recount the debate between Arius and Athanasius, or quote Jurgen Moltmann, but they can do theology, and they can proclaim their perspective of the Christian faith authentically and meaningfully. What they claim to be meaningful will evolve as they listen to and reflect on the experiences, thoughts, emotions, faith, and interpretations of others. Individual participants in the church’s conversation grow in this way; and as a result, the congregational conversation will deepen. P. 20

We want conversation, not debate. We want dialogue, not monologue. In monologue, one participant serves as the active speaker and other participants passively listen. In dialogue, all participants potentially take on the roles of both listener and speaker, in give-and-take fashion. Here is a comparison between the two:

| <i>Conversation</i> | <i>Debate</i> |
|---|--|
| <i>Collaborative</i> : two or more sides work together toward a common understanding. | <i>Oppositional</i> : two sides oppose one another and attempt to prove one another wrong. |
| <i>Positive</i> : One listens to understand, find meaning, and find agreement | <i>Negative</i> : One listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its argument. |
| <i>Receptive</i> : it enlarges and possibly changes a participant’s point of view. | <i>Rejective</i> : it affirms a participant’s own point of view. |
| <i>Inquisitive</i> : it reveals assumptions for reevaluation | <i>Defensive</i> : it defends its own assumptions as truth |
| <i>Open-minded</i> : it creates an open-ended attitude, an openness to being wrong and an openness to change. | <i>Close-minded</i> : it creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right. |
| <i>Inoffensive</i> : it involves a real concern for the other person and seeks not to alienate or offend. | <i>Offensive</i> : it involves countering the other position without focusing on feelings or the relationship, and often belittles or deprecates the other person. |
| <i>Open-ended</i> : it leaves the door open for further discussion. | <i>Conclusive</i> : it demands a conclusion, and therefore an end to the discussion. |

The goal of debate and argument is persuasion; one position is accepted and the other is not; one person or group wins, and another loses. Sometimes debate is necessary to preserve doctrinal purity. More often, it is unnecessarily divisive.

The goal of dialogue and conversation is not persuasion, but conversion – coming alongside and turning together, without verbal sparring or undue influence. Remember, our only authority is Scripture.

Verbal misbehavior such as passive aggressive comments, lies, insults, assertions of power, misrepresentation of facts, and misapplication of the gospel can inflict emotional harm and create distorted views of reality. We are to speak words of life, not death, words that build up, not tear down, words that bring clarity, not distortion.

Dialogue at heart is a kind of social relation that engages its participants. A successful dialogue involves a willing partnership and cooperation in the face of likely disagreements, confusions, failures, and misunderstandings. Anyone who gathers at the discussion table enters into a covenant of granting a basic level of trust and striving to be trustworthy. We should be confident that everyone at the table is striving to be honest, respectful, and edifying.

Covenantal conversation implies an egalitarian view of community, in which all conversation partners are equally valued and all voices are welcome around the table. This egalitarian approach to the conversational community does not mean that everyone gathered is equal in intellectual ability, knowledge of the subject or issues being discussed, life experience, or spiritual wisdom.

When we proclaim what we believe to be the truth, the others at the table are not objects for our dissertation, vessels to be filled from our solitary font of truth. To value other participants in the conversation as subjects instead of objects, the conversation must be constructed as a give-and-take partnership among all those involved. All are seeking to be filled by others, and to offer what they have to fill the others. There is a spirit of discovery, so that the tone is exploratory and interrogative. It involves a commitment to see things through until there is meaningful understanding or agreement.

The Rule of Reciprocity

Reciprocity means that I claim the right to speak not only for myself, but for everyone else at the table. And when I speak, I should be able to trust that I will be listened to and taken seriously. When others speak, I listen to them and take their words seriously as well. This rule does not dictate that everyone must consent to whatever is laid on the table.

Asymmetry, which is a difference in beliefs, commitments, and experience, is essential to conversation, and it should be highly valued. Otherwise we may have mutual confirmation, but not conversation. Any conversation partner should feel free to disagree with me and should express that disagreement. But as they do that, they should still show respect for me as a person, and not caricature or belittle my experiences, ideas, and beliefs. Before jumping into debate, they

should open themselves to what I have to offer. In other words, they should be willing to risk changing their minds, and altering their beliefs (to be converted) by whatever I or anyone else at the table has to say.

What makes this work is that when we make a proclamation, we make it *tentatively*. I express myself to engage and advance the conversation, not to shut it down. I am not apologetic for my thoughts and beliefs, but I am aware of the limitations of my insight, and of my constant need for conversion. I express my opinion with the desire of having it tested by the community for the sake of our mutual conversion, and to ensure its conformity with the authority of Scripture.

When I speak into the midst of the church's conversations, I should not be looking to have the last word. Rather, my words should be a response to words that have gone before, and should lead into words that will follow. I hope that my proclamation invites both complementary and contradictory proclamation from others. Only then will I be challenged to grow in my faith and understanding, and only then will I be able to challenge others to grow in theirs. P. 21-27

The Rule of Participation

If conversation is to be reciprocal, and invite mutual conversion, all participants must be *active* participants. Everyone must be able and willing to offer opinions, pose questions, challenge differing points of view, and be challenged by different points of view. Every statement in a conversation is an attempt to be understood without any guarantee that understanding will actually be achieved. At the same time, no one should be allowed to act in a manner that prohibits the full participation of others, whether that takes the form of diminishing someone else's point of view, or dominating the conversation.

The Rule of Commitment

Consensus may be too much to hope for, but it's not too much to hope for some level of understanding of one another's views, and of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that underlie them. This requires a commitment by everyone at the table to pursue the conversation even when difficult and divisive concerns are raised. That commitment is based on the fact that we have one Body, one Spirit, one Mind, and one Father over all. We are one in Christ, and nothing must be allowed to break that bond or create disunity in the Body, unless it goes to the heart of the gospel. There are such things as irreconcilable differences. Even so, we must keep the focus on the doctrine at stake, not on the individual. Defending the faith should never be done at the cost of another person's dignity. What we do, we do in love. P. 30

The Goal

Freedom must exist for our conversations, within limits, to *evolve*. As mentioned earlier, in a hierarchical, monologue-driven conversation, the preacher's sermon controls the content and direction of the church's conversation. But where we widen the number of participants, and we move into church-wide or community-wide conversation, the discussion must be *open-ended*, moving and responding to the flow of the conversation. It can be appropriately limited, disciplined, even directed, but not controlled. Each contribution is unique and has a unique

impact on the conversation itself, and the resulting comments. The beginnings of conversations may be strictly defined, but never their endings.

As said earlier, the goal of the church's conversations is *conversion*. This conversion must not be predetermined in any except the most general ways. We want all conversation participants to be converted in the sense of growing in their understandings, relationship to, and interaction with God, self, and the world. We want the conversational community to be transformed by both the tensions and the mutual understandings that occur in the process of conversing. But we must resist the temptation to determine in advance (and thus manipulate) how such growth should manifest itself in the participants. The conversion that occurs may not, and probably should not, be the same for every individual involved; such unrestricted diversity of transformation will determine the nature of communal conversion. We should seek neither forced intellectual consensus, nor forced conformity under the guise of *koinonia*. The wind blows where it will.⁴ To try to control it will stifle the manifestation of the Spirit in conversational proclamation. p. 31

The Dilemma

How do we engage a postmodern congregation, or a postmodern world, in this kind of conversation? It isn't simple. Much of the church's discourse has been monologue and debate. We want to create a community in which no authority figure has the last word (i.e. in which the Bible is our only authority), and in which no one wins or loses an argument (but everyone is educated, uplifted, affirmed, and informed). P. 31

We want to change our view of proclamation from a monological declaration of universal truth, to a give-and-take approach that gives participants the freedom to make meaning out of what is said (employing a postmodern epistemology). How do we do that without compromising biblical authority and falling into private interpretation of Scripture? To begin with, the level of individual commitment and participation required goes against current cultural tendencies toward isolation and individualism. We are suffering from a social form of progressive *aphonia*. That is, we are losing our personal voices. During a period in which feelings of isolation and loneliness are on the rise, too many of us are becoming emotionally and socially mute.⁵ P. 32

The church must be intentional in its effort to inventory, nurture, change, and expand the church's conversations. This is a collective effort between pastor, staff, and congregation.

- *Inventory* – where is church talk monological, argumentative, conversational, hierarchical, or egalitarian?
- *Nurture* – reflect on, encourage, facilitate, and stimulate those conversation circles that best embrace the ethics and etiquette of conversation described above.
- *Change* – in an appropriate manner, the results of the reflection, and the practices of those circles with a conversational ethos, should slowly and gently be used to influence other arenas of church talk. Where can hierarchy be replaced with a reciprocity that still values leadership? Where can debate be changed to conversation, or where there is necessary debate, where can conversational attitudes be employed to sanctify it?

⁴ This is an interesting take on the leading of the Spirit; we mustn't forget that we have one Body, one mind, one Spirit, and one Savior.

⁵ John L. Locke, *The Devoicing of Society*

- *Expansion* – By increasing the number of conversation circles to represent a wider diversity of conversational topics, degrees of commitment, structures, and times, more members of the body of Christ will find a place where they feel comfortable proclaiming their experience and knowledge of God, and learning from others.

All of these steps will incorporate the slow process of *trust building*: trust that the conversations are valuable; trust that conversation partners will be supportive and reciprocal. While the slow pace is frustrating, it is appropriate to the nature of conversation itself. Conversations that take place in conversation are more often minute transformations than radical u-turns. As individual conversations slowly evolve, the church as a community of conversation will also slowly evolve. As individuals are converted bit by bit, so will the community of those individuals be changed.

P. 33-35

The rest of the book is Wesley Owen's prescription for a homiletic methodology that will be in line with what he has said to this point. If we consider what Stuart Murray has to say in his book *Church After Christendom* about establishing a centered-set of core values, this conversation ethos would be part of that set. As such, the principles need to be taught to the whole church as part of an induction or catechetical process.