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LOSING THE CENTER

by
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Every sermon has a center of gravity. Whether the goal of the sermon is to explain, prove, or apply, the expositor must stand on something to make his or her point. In expository preaching, the weight is placed upon God's Word. It is this emphasis that makes a sermon truly biblical. Thomas Long, professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology, observes, "Faithful engagement with Scripture is a standard by which preaching should be measured, and the normal week-in, week-out practice of preaching should consist of sermons drawn from specific biblical texts." According to Long, this type of preaching should be normative in churches. "Biblical preaching in this strict sense should be the rule and not the exception."[1]

But in this postmodern age a seismic change is taking place, and the reverberations are shaking the pulpits of the West. In postmodern preaching the center of gravity has shifted away from the text to the preacher's own experience and that of the audience. In this kind of preaching the traditional relationship between text and anecdote is

reversed. Instead of using anecdotes to illustrate the central truth of the text, personal story is the central truth of the message and is corroborated by Scripture. The weight of proof in the sermon does not rest on proposition but on identifiable experience.

The Seismic Shift: From Metanarrative to Micronarrative

The term that is often used to refer to this approach is *micronarrative*. It is rooted in the thinking of twentieth-century philosopher Jean-François Lyotard who asserted that the legitimation of knowledge in postmodern society occurs differently than in the modern era. Lyotard claimed that "the grand narrative" has lost its credibility for people in the postmodern age.[2] The weakness of these "metanarratives," according to Lyotard, is that they do not fit everyone.

D. A. Carson, research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, alludes to this when he writes that the fundamental change in postmodernism has been in the area of epistemology—the way in which we know things.[3] In the premodern era truth began with God.[4] It was a matter of revelation and tradition. This kind of knowledge was certain because it came from an all-knowing or trusted source. The modern era did not put an end to tradition but made it subordinate to experience and empiricism. The perspective of the modernist is characterized by Anthony Giddens this way: "To sanction a practice because it is traditional will not do; tradition can be justified, but only in the light of knowledge which is not itself authenticated by tradition."[5] Therefore, in the modern age, truth was considered reliable when it could be validated by experientially based knowledge—the observable, measurable, repeatable data of science. Postmodernism shifts the locus of knowledge away from the external sources of tradition and scientific method (premodernism) and from empirical—measurable—experience (modernism) to the internal realm of subjective experience.

In preaching, this change of perspective is reflected in a shift from metanarrative to micronarrative. If a metanarrative is the big story that explains everything, its alter ego is the micronarrative, the little story

that tells others what the world looks like from one's personal angle of vision. The key distinctive of a micronarrative is that it is "local" rather than universal. This local perspective is the source of the micronarrative's appeal—and its greatest weakness. When the micronarrative becomes the center of the sermon, personal experience becomes the final arbiter of truth instead of the text. The Bible does not disappear and may even play a prominent role in the message. However, a sermon grounded in micronarrative tends to treat the Bible in an ornamental fashion. Biblical texts are strung throughout the sermon like the glittering bulbs on a Christmas tree, giving the impression that Scripture is prominently featured in the message. But in the micronarrative-based sermon the text serves the story and not the other way around.

The Role of Story in Preaching

Story has always played a part in evangelical preaching. The use of story in preaching is validated by the fact that narrative is often God's chosen method of communicating about Himself. Much of the truth of God's Word is conveyed in narrative form. J. Kent Edwards, who directs the doctor of ministry program at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, California, warns that genre influences meaning, with dangerous theological implications: "The correct genre can enhance and support a message; the wrong genre can distort and even destroy a message."[6] Author Walter Wangerin describes the power of story when he tells how he used stories to catechize the children of his congregation. "Storytelling conveys the realities and the relationships of our faith better than any other form of communication we have," Wangerin explains, "for in story the child does more than think and analyze and solve and remember: the child actually experiences God through Jesus and through Jesus' ministry."[7] Some truths may be best communicated by way of narrative.

Story, however, can be a double-edged sword. "People have many ways of narrating the story of their lives," Thomas Long observes. "They can tell the 'Christian story' of their lives, but they can also relate their family story, their national story, their racial story, their vocational story, the story of their psychological growth, and so on."[8] The hope, Long

points out, is that the Christian story will function as the "narrative center" of all the other stories. But this is not always the case. Sometimes the order is reversed so that "the lesser story erodes or replaces the gospel story."[9] This is the danger of the sermon that is rooted in micronarrative.

Despite this danger, micronarrative does have a legitimate place in the message. Jesus sometimes appealed to personal experience to validate His point to His audience. In Matthew 7:9–11 he asks, "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" In these verses Jesus appeals to human experience in a line of reasoning that moves from the lesser to the greater. He uses the "local" experience of his listeners as a signpost to point them to the larger metanarrative of God's goodness.

Personal experience was the evidence offered by the man in John 9:25, when he was questioned by the leaders of the synagogue. The religious leaders claimed that Jesus was a sinner, but the man replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

This is the essence of micronarrative: "I do not know everything, but I do know my own experience and this is what it tells me."

The Place of Personal Testimony

Micronarratives in the form of personal testimony were an integral part of the Christian witness in the New Testament era and in the early church.[10] The apostle Paul used a micronarrative of personal experience to support his contention that Jesus was the Christ (Galatians 1:11–24). The contrast between his "previous way of life" and his present behavior offered strong evidence of the truth of his gospel. He pointed to the Galatians' personal experience to help them see the flaw in their slip back into legalism. "I would like to learn just one thing from you" he challenged in Galatians 3:2–3. "Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

The use of anecdotes as sermon illustrations first appeared in Christian preaching in the sixth century, when Gregory the Great introduced the use of non-scriptural stories into the sermon as illustrations of biblical truth.[11] Gregory compiled an encyclopedia of anecdotes, known as *exempla*. This medieval precursor to the modern sermon illustration database, consisting mostly of miracle stories involving Italian saints, was widely used by the mendicant friars of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to flesh out the doctrine of the sermon for the audience.[12]

During the Reformation the dimension of personal experience was evident in the sermons of Martin Luther, who often relied on personal testimony and utilized the first person.[13] Luther appealed to audience experience through "the copious heaping up of linked examples, and the establishment of antithesis through imagined dialogue."[14]

Narrated experiences also show up frequently in the preaching of the great evangelical preachers of the nineteenth century, exemplified by evangelist D. L. Moody. Moody often incorporated testimony stories into his messages that described his own experience and the experiences of others. Testimony as proof of the gospel runs through all of Moody's sermons.[15]

Testimony also figured importantly in the theology of the burgeoning fundamentalist movement. The use of personal testimony loomed so large in the fundamentalist tradition, in fact, that it appeared in the five-volume theological work that gave the movement its name. George Marsden explains, "Each of the first five volumes, which were otherwise heavy on higher criticism and doctrine, concluded with personal testimony."[16] Fundamentalist theologian J. Gresham Machen contended that Christian experience was "one of the primary evidences for the truth of the gospel record."[17]

However, Machen was no postmodernist. He believed that the micronarrative of the believer's experience was subordinate to the metanarrative of the gospel events. "Christian experience is rightly used when it confirms the documentary evidence," he wrote, "but it can never possibly provide a substitute for the documentary evidence."[18] Machen was convinced that dichotomizing biblical truth and scientific truth was dangerous. He argued that truth is harmonious in nature and that what is true in religion cannot also be false in science and philosophy: "All

methods of arriving at truth, if they be valid methods, will arrive at a harmonious result."[19]

The Danger of Personal Experience

Stories of personal experience are interesting and can be a powerful tool for today's preacher. But the sermon's foundation must be laid with better material. Personal experience provides an uncertain footing for the expository message. Experience can be a strong testimony when it is used in a corroborative way but experience is not self-validating. One person's personal experience can be used to contradict that of another.

Many years ago I heard a pastor whom I deeply respected challenge a world-renowned atheist's assumptions about the Christian faith with these words: "There isn't anything I can tell you about Jesus Christ that you don't already know, but there is one thing I can tell you that you haven't heard, that is my personal testimony." He went on to describe his conversion experience and the subsequent change that the work of Christ produced in his life.

I was so impressed by this approach that a few months later I attempted to use the same line of reasoning on a bald-headed devotee of eastern mysticism in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I bumped into him on my way out of a bookstore and he asked me to buy a colorful magazine filled with stories about the gods he worshiped. I attempted to engage him with the gospel. When I told him I knew the gospel was true because of the change Jesus Christ had brought about in my life, he flashed a beatific smile. "I know exactly what you are talking about," he declared. "Lord Krishna did the same for me."

Machen is correct: "Christian experience is rightly used when it helps to convince us that the events narrated in the New Testament actually did occur; but it can never enable us to be Christians whether the events occurred or not."[20] All experiences may be true experiences, but the conclusions we draw from them are not always true.

The believer's experience confirms the testimony of the biblical record. But it is the biblical record and the events it recounts that interpret the believer's experience. If Christ's resurrection did not actually take place, it does not change our experiences, but it does change their

significance. If Christ did not rise, "we are to be pitied more than all men," no matter what our experience has been (1 Cor. 15:19).

Preaching that makes the micronarrative its center of gravity is interested primarily in the audience. As laudable as this is, it is not a sufficient focus for biblical exposition. The goal of the expositor is to convey God's message. The prophet Jeremiah captures this idea when he speaks of the "burden of the Lord" in Jeremiah 23:33–38. The burden is the heart of the prophetic message, the essential content that the prophet must convey to God's people. In this respect, every preacher feels the weight of the prophetic mantle when standing before the congregation.

The Preacher and the Prophet

The preacher, however, differs from the prophet in an important respect. Although both aim to communicate the Word of God, the preacher's words are not God's words. When the prophets spoke, they were "carried along" by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). Such language, while not necessarily implying dictation, speaks clearly of divine control. The prophets spoke from God. This unique ministry of the Holy Spirit guaranteed that the true prophet would say only what God intended. The expositor, on the other hand, speaks about God's Word.

This does not mean that the Holy Spirit is absent from the process of sermon formulation and preaching. Paul's request that the Ephesians pray for him, so that whenever he opened his mouth words might be "given" to him, is a clear indication of the preacher's dependence upon God (Eph. 6:19). But unction, in this sense, is not the same thing as inspiration. The distinction between God's Word and the preacher's words is an important one and must be maintained. God's Word is inerrant and infallible. It is authoritative and must be obeyed. Those who reject God's Word reject God Himself.

The preacher cannot make such a claim. While the expositor speaks with authority, it is derived authority. The preacher's words do not have the same inherent authority that the prophet's words possessed. When speaking in the capacity of his office, the prophet's words were God's words. The expositor's words remain his own, no matter how good the sermon may be. The authority of the expositor is contingent in nature

and extends only as far as the text itself. Those who reject the preacher's words reject God only when the preacher conveys the truth of the biblical text.

Consequently, the burden placed upon the preacher is both the same and different from the obligation laid upon the prophet. The prophet was charged with the task of accurately conveying the words of God to his audience. The expositor shares this responsibility. Kent Edwards warns, "Good preaching is not based on original idea. It strives to say to a contemporary audience what the original author of the biblical text said to the original audience."[21]

A Mediator of the Text

But the biblical expositor bears an added burden—the responsibility of being a mediator of the text. In a sense, the preacher stands between the text and the congregation and acts on behalf of both. The preacher studies what God has said in order to know what He intended to communicate. The preacher also listens to the text on behalf of the congregation, in an effort to discern its implications for them. The expositor tries to anticipate how the audience will hear the text and frames the message in a way that is best suited to their needs. In short, the preacher's challenge is to convey the "unoriginal" idea of the text in an original and practical way. The difficult task assigned to God's messenger is that of being interesting and relevant without altering the message.

How, then, do we make certain that the center of gravity in the message is rooted in the metanarrative of God's Word? It is not necessarily a question of whether the sermon begins with a reading of the text or a personal story. Micronarrative may be a very effective starting point for the sermon. Preachers often use personal experience to establish common ground and raise concerns that the text will eventually address. Personal experience can even be used as a running narrative in the sermon, functioning as a kind of antiphonal reply or thematic "call and response" that answers the main assertions of the biblical text. The story serves as a bridge to the text and a living metaphor that reflects the sermon's central idea and exemplifies the points being made from the Scripture text.

Three tests can help us determine whether the sermon's center of gravity is rooted in the metanarrative of Scripture or the micronarrative of personal experience. First, ask yourself where the critical mass of the sermon is found. In nature, gravity is related to mass. The same is true of the sermon. Is the sermon grounded in the idea of the biblical text or in the concepts that are conveyed by story? This is not a mathematical matter, as if you could determine the answer simply by calculating the number of verses read during the message. Rather, it is conceptual. Where do the ideas in your sermon come from? Do they originate with the text? Or are they grounded in the stories you use? Sermons where the biblical content has a low center of gravity relegate the ideas of Scripture to the periphery of the message. The use of Scripture is incidental and superficial.

Second, when it comes to gravity, the presence of mass causes objects to accelerate toward each other. The same should be true of the relationship between story and text in the sermon. When you use personal experience in the message, it should move the audience closer to an understanding of the text and its implications for them. Does your use of story point listeners to the text? Does it clarify the text for them and help them to see what implementation looks like in real life? Does it motivate them to follow through on the admonition of the text? Or does the story seem to function as an end in itself?

Third, gravity gives weight to objects. Where is the weight in this sermon? Is it a function of the truth of the text or the stories you tell? Suppose you eliminated all the Scripture from your message. Could you still preach the sermon? If the answer is yes, the biblical center of gravity is too low and needs to be adjusted.

Personal experience is a useful touch point in the sermon but it should never be the final reference point. In nature the center of gravity is the location where the weight of an object is concentrated. A proper center of gravity is essential for keeping one's balance. In the realm of preaching the delicate balance between biblical truth and personal experience can be maintained only when the sermon's center of gravity is oriented around the biblical text.

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NOTES

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