

It Will Preach!

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.—Hebrews 12:1

Preaching evangelistic sermons is not easy. For some, the word evangelism conjures images of someone chasing you down the street, Bible raised, in order to beat the “Word” into you. Many pastors avoid evangelistic sermons because they do not want their laity to “chase” them out of the church. Within the Wesleyan tradition, however, evangelistic sermons have been important to our formation as disciples. and Charles Wesley can be instructive for us today on developing such a sermon.

Two themes, in particular, are highlighted by Charles Wesley: (1) sermons should speak to all of us, (2) sermons should speak through all of us. By “us” I mean the gathered worshipping community hearing the preached word. In the limited space of this article it is impossible to go into great detail on these themes so I will only note a few salient points using Hebrews 12:1 and the Wesley hymn “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing.”

Speak to All of Us

An evangelistic sermon should speak to the congregation by helping people to intersect with the gospel and to hear good news. Charles Wesley is helpful in thinking about how we can integrate these perspectives in our sermons. If one looks at stanza seven (the opening stanza on page 57) on page 58 of *The United Methodist Hymnal* they will notice Charles begins to create a context where an intersection is possible between the Hebrews 12:1 text and his hymn. The first line of the hymn reads, “O for a thousand tongues to sing my dear Redeemer’s praise!”¹ The intersection in this case is a visual and auditory in the way he invites people to picture what a cloud of witnesses could look like and to imagine the sound coming from this cloud. It invites us to ask what it would be like to be one of that cloud of witnesses.

The importance of this evangelistically for sermon preparation is helping parishioners connect to the gospel. As preachers, if we want people to “sing the Redeemer’s praise,” then we must create a context where an intersection with the biblical word occurs. This intersection has to be relevant to one’s setting. A person preaching in rural Kansas may create the intersection differently than someone preaching in downtown New York. In either case if the parishioners cannot connect to the gospel, then we cannot expect them to “sing the Redeemer’s praise.”

As part of helping parishioners to connect to the gospel so that it is speaking to them, make sure they know there is good news. One of the reasons people fear the word evangelism is they do not perceive the good news. The focus is often on “forcing” one to accept Jesus and not allowing the Holy Spirit to work. In contrast, Charles proclaims good news in stanza nine, “Jesus! the name that charms our fears... ’tis life, and health, and peace!”² Preachers should remind the congregation they have received a



Douglas Powe is an assistant professor of evangelism, E. Stanley Jones Chair at Saint Paul School of Theology. He is coauthor with Henry Knight of *Transforming Evangelism: The Wesleyan Way of Sharing Faith* coming out in November, 2006.

new life in Jesus the Christ that shapes the world differently for us. It is because of this new life that we are able to “persevere on the journey before us.” Evangelism is not about creating fear, but it about the good news of what we have received as followers of Jesus the Christ.

Speak Through All of Us

Not only must an evangelistic sermon speak to the people, but it must speak through the people by the power of the Holy Spirit. This means parishioners are willing to share by word and deed what they have experienced in worship. If the point of a sermon is simply intellectual edification, then it is not evangelistic within the Wesleyan tradition. For it to be evangelistic it must include holiness of heart and life. The holiness of life means a willingness to share with others in a concrete fashion. Unfortunately, it is at this point that many parishioners become anti-evangelistic. It is important to remember, however, if the sermon truly spoke to us, then it will speak through us in some manner.

Charles in stanza 15 helps us to understand the movement toward holiness of life when he writes, “Harlots and publicans and thieves, in holy triumph join!”³ S T Kimbrough Jr. argues this movement toward holiness begins when Charles fuses praise and mission.⁴ Kimbrough’s point is simply claiming the hymn is about praising God without requiring anything of us is to misunderstand Charles’ theology. Similarly, pastors must convey to parishioners that the gospel must speak through all of us so that all can share in the good news.

How the gospel speaks through someone will differ from person to person. Narrow definitions of the manner in which the gospel speaks through people are not helpful and often lead to negative perceptions of evangelism. It is important for pastors to help parishioners to utilize their spiritual gifts so the gospel speaks through them in some fashion, while never forgetting it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to speak God’s word and not pushing for our own agenda. The former is what Wesley advocates and the latter is the trap we often fall into in the name of evangelism.

Preaching evangelistic sermons is not easy. Charles Wesley is instructive on how we can shape a sermon to have an evangelistic perspective. Preachers should make sure sermons speak to all of us and that they speak through all of us. If you look at the hymn, “O For a Thousand Tongues to sing,” in its entirety this is exactly what Wesley does. He gives his personal testi-

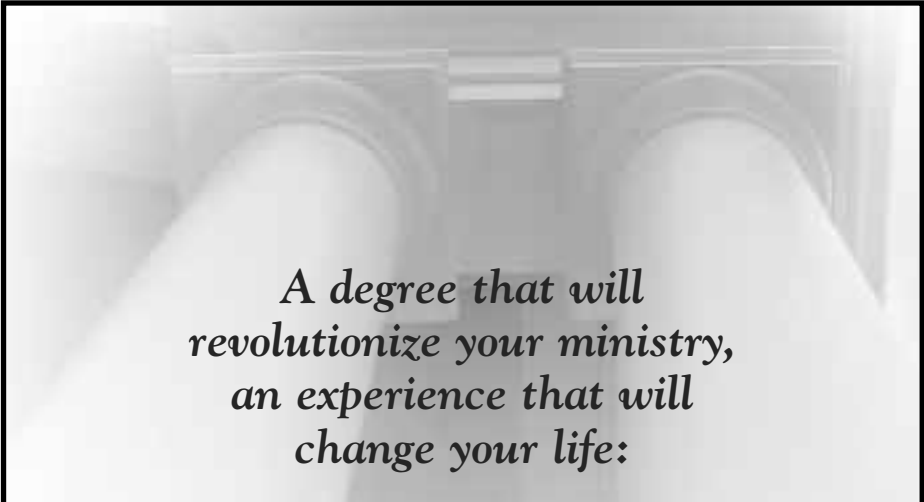
mony in the first six stanzas. He helps people to make a connection to the gospel in stanzas seven to twelve. At the end he charges all of us with the task of helping others to understand the gospel is for them. In preparing evangelistic sermons remember we (all of us in worship) are the cloud of witnesses that must allow the gospel to speak to and through us. □

1. Hymn 58, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989).

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. S T Kimbrough, *A Heart To Praise My God: Wesley Hymns for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 143.



*A degree that will
revolutionize your ministry,
an experience that will
change your life:*

THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY PROGRAM

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY TRACK

Learn how to build healthy and dynamic marriages and families

CHURCH RENEWAL TRACK

*Discover the keys to transforming individuals,
churches, and communities*

Classes meet in intensive sessions each January and June.



PALMER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE SEMINARY OF EASTERN UNIVERSITY

The Whole Gospel for the Whole World through Whole Persons

www.palmerseminary.edu

1-800-220-3287 ext.368