

PREACHING AS THE SPIRIT MOVES



By Luke A. Powery

Throughout the history of the church, preachers have used *epiclesis*, the invocation of the Holy Spirit, as a clear sign that the spoken word is impotent without the blessing of divine presence. Preaching is dead without the lifeline of the Spirit, which is why many preachers, on any given occasion, can be heard uttering the theological mantra, “Come Holy Spirit, Come!” But what happens when the Spirit comes or moves as we preach? How does experience of the Spirit help us preach with relevance in our various congregational contexts? The answer to these questions has something to do with the day of Pentecost as described in Acts 2:1-13.

This article aims to reveal how the Spirit is connected to effective contextual preaching through the lens of Pentecost.

First, I will present the importance of a contextual word for the task of preaching, even as it relates to the Word, Jesus Christ. Second, I will then demonstrate the relationship between the Spirit and proclaiming a contextual word by looking more closely at the Acts 2 pericope. It will become clear that the

Spirit’s movement through preaching is not solely about being textually insightful but contextually relevant.

Importance of a Contextual Word

Context is inescapable; once we are born, we enter it and breathe it. To ignore context makes for inauthentic proclamation because preachers not only “come from *within* the community of faith”¹ but from *within* a specific cultural community, not to it from the outside. Preachers are immersed into congregational and cultural contexts and necessarily (at least in theory) proclaim a word for a particular people in a particular place at a particular time, suggesting that every preaching event is particular or specific to certain ecclesial settings.

This understanding of the homiletical task has led scholars, such as Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, to argue for “preaching which not only gives serious attention to the interpretation of biblical texts, but which gives equally serious attention to the interpretation of congregations and their sociocultural contexts.” Tisdale advocates not just “faithfulness” to the gospel, but also

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“fittingness” (in content, form and style) to the congregation and its circumstances.²

Preachers should aim for contextual proclamation, and as liberation theologian Jose Comblin rightly declares, “If the word does not speak to their human experience, it cannot be the word of God.”³ The word of God proclaimed has to relate to human experience and be spoken in a relevant tongue; if not, then it is not the word of God it should be because God’s Word for the world became human.

John writes, “The Word became flesh and lived among us . . .” (John 1:14). God speaks to the human experience through Jesus Christ. God’s Word, God’s sermon, was human and manifested himself in a particular concrete way, in a particular context with a particular culture. This Word became incarnate in an embodied, concrete person known as Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was a contextual Word, a Word to the world. To speak to the human world, the Word of God or God’s Sermon had to be human, relating to the experience of needy humanity. Humans would not understand the Word of God if it was not human, on their terms, in their context, and in their language. God translated the divine Word into human flesh that human life might have the opportunity to hear and comprehend the gospel. It is important to remember that God’s Word became human—that is, was translated—through the agency of the Holy Spirit.⁴ The Word was contextualized because the Spirit made him concretely human, demonstrating how the Spirit translates the Word for specific contexts, settings, or situations. This suggests that the Spirit translates the Word through our preaching words in order to be understood in the various contexts of our congregations.

Translation of the Word

The Pentecost account of Acts 2:1-13 demonstrates this translation work of the Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit and “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” The Spirit enables this gift of multilingualism that is relevant for that context and speaks the same languages of those present in this “congregation.” Luke tells us that “Jews from every nation under heaven” become bewildered at this sound of the Spirit from the disciples because “each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.” The Jews from every nation are amazed at what they are hearing and ask “how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” That these Jews hear their “own language” is stressed over and over again even when they say “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

In this story, the Holy Spirit gives a contextual cultural word to each disciple for each particular culture represented. The Spirit translates the word about “God’s deeds of power” into the language of the hearers in order that they might understand what is being proclaimed. The Spirit ignites the preaching tongues of the disciples and the people in the crowd hear in their “own language” though the basic message about God’s power is the same. The Spirit speaks a particular, contextual word in the language of the people. Through the translation of the Spirit, a preacher is empowered to speak a word that is relevant for a specific congregational context; without the Spirit of translation, this would be impossible. Only through the Spirit can our sermon content, form, and style be received by the hearers as their “own language.”

This parallels Henry Mitchell’s notion that sermonic material

be familiar to the hearers and meet their “felt need” such that the biblical story is viewed by the congregation as “my story” much in the same way as the people in Acts hear in their “own language.”⁵ Preachers, like the disciples who preached in the Spirit, should “make it plain” in their sermons by using the vernacular of the people, preaching in a common language or what Mitchell calls the “mother tongue of the Spirit.”⁶ He even recognizes that only through the Spirit can preachers speak in such a way that connects with the cultural language of a congregation with the primary goal of having the gospel speak to people’s needs.⁷ Speaking about God in people’s “own language,” with the hope of meeting their needs, is a work of the Spirit because experience of the Spirit leads to contextual proclamation. Experiencing the Spirit as a preacher means that we not only can speak about texts but to concrete contexts.

Pastors can only speak the language of their people if the Spirit translates their fallible words. This is what happens in Acts 2, reminding us that “the chief interpreter in preaching is never the preacher but always the Holy Spirit.”⁸ If the Spirit does not move, our preaching does not matter because the communities in which we preach will not hear God’s gospel in their own language and thus not know that it is for them. Pentecost is about a community of people hearing God’s word in their own language via the translating work of the Spirit. Preaching in a Pentecostal way means that we will speak the language of the people, aiming to meet their needs at a particular time in a particular place. This is not to say that preaching as the Spirit moves will guarantee that the parishioners will affirm what you say with hearty “amens.” Rather, some may leave the church saying “oh my,” amazed and perplexed, asking “What does this mean?” And if we want to be honest, some may even sneer (Acts 2:12-13). Nonetheless, we continue to pray “Come Holy Spirit, Come.” □



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1 Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 10.

2 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 33.

3 Jose Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 108.

4 See Luke 1:26-2:21. Also, John Thompson notes that in the theology of Karl Barth the Holy Spirit is the agent of the incarnation. See John Thompson, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1991), 41-52.

5 Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 66, 104.

6 Mitchell, 18, 76.

7 Paul Scott Wilson argues that every sermon should identify and address one need of a congregation, suggesting that preaching aims to meet human needs. See *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 48-50.

8 Stephen Farris, *Preaching That Matters: The Bible and Our Lives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 16.