

Preaching as an Exegetical Weaver

An interview with Robert Smith, Jr.

By Michael Duduit (Preaching Editor, Spring 2024)

Robert Smith Jr. has recently retired after many years as a professor of preaching at Beeson Divinity School. Smith regularly speaks at events around the country, including this year's National Conference on Preaching. He is the author of several books including *Doctrine That Dances*. He was recently interviewed by *Preaching* editor Michael Duduit.

Preaching: You've been preaching and teaching for quite a few years now. How has preaching changed during that time and has your own preaching changed over the years?

Smith: I think preaching has changed for the better in some respects. What has been done in many instances has been shallow, has not been rooted and has not been rigorous enough, and people now know that and desire something that is meaty and something that will sustain them beyond the benediction on Sunday morning. So people are hungry and they are quickly about to detect substance from just stuff. That's one way.

Therefore, we've gone to explore and practice expository preaching and preaching that is more Christ-centered and preaching that demands application so that the what question is no longer satisfactory; it's now the so what question - what difference does this text make in my life - and the now what question - what must I do as a result of what I know I should do and what I am to do when it comes to the now what?

My preaching has changed, I think, for similar reasons. I would hope that it was not shallow before, but it was not deep enough and I have become more and more hungry to present the Word to the Lord and to His people. Something that goes beyond not casual, but just regular investigation of the text. I'm looking for something in the text that certainly is a diamond, but a facet of a diamond that I've never seen in a text before. I'm looking for that which has been in the field. It's a pearl, but it's hidden treasure. So I look for that hidden treasure that I've never seen before so that I can present something that is appealing, attractive and life-transforming.

Preaching: Robert, you're a very effective preacher. What's your process for developing a sermon from the point you know you're going to be preaching to the time of delivery? How do you go about preparing a message?

Smith: What I love to do, and I've been saying this for a long time, is just to take the naked text and read it with a notepad at hand and a pencil. I'm old-fashioned so I don't do it on a computer. In fact, I'm a pecker, I'm not a typer. So what I do first is read the text; I want to read the text a hundred times. Sometimes, I tell the students 50 times, not in one sitting. The passage, not the verse but the passage, the pericope, the teaching paragraph to read it at least 50 times in order to be immersed in the text and to elicit the response of my five senses. I want to know: what is the text showing me? What do I see, what do I hear? What do I taste? What do I feel or what do I smell? Because the text speaks to all of those senses.

For instance, I'll take a text like John 18:18 that shows Peter in the courtyard of Caiaphas, the high priest. Jesus has been taken into the house and Peter is warming his hands over the charcoal fire. As Helmut Thielicke, the great German theologian would say, that's the olfactory gland - that is, the smell is the organ of remembrance, it causes people to remember that which they have forgotten. And so Peter smells the charcoal fire.

But three days later in John 21:9, the scripture says that when Jesus is spotted by Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, that he takes his fish and swims to the shore to see Jesus. And Jesus is baking or broiling fish on a charcoal fire, not just a fire. And the fact that charcoal has that smell help brings those two passages together.

I think Peter remembered that three days prior to this present time when he's in the presence of Jesus, while Jesus is baking fish with charcoal fire, that the last time he smelled charcoal was when he was denying Jesus three times. And this not only brought him under conviction, but extended his conviction and prepared him for the three questions that Jesus will ask him about him loving of Jesus. And Peter, of course, has to respond as a way of negating, if you will, his three denials for the Lord. So that's what I do. And then I just begin to gather material like a good cook.

My mother was a great cook and she had all kinds of ingredients around her. She'd sample this and that and if the potato was bad, she threw it out. If this particular butter didn't contain enough sugar, she'd add more. If something was too salty, she'd get rid of that until she finally got the concoction that she wanted, then she'd put it together in the kind of baking pan she wanted to use, put in the stove, brought it out, and if it was a cake, she'd put frosting on it and boom, we were having it with some milk after our meal.

So I'm a gatherer and I'm an exegetical weaver and that's really what I do. It has to be fun to me because I think that people remember best what they enjoy most. And I remember best what I enjoy most. So I get through the rigors of all of that until it starts becoming fun and putting it together and down, being able to serve it to my hearers.

Preaching: How long does it typically take you to develop a message?

Smith: 58 and a half years, almost 59 years.

Preaching: I knew that was coming!

Smith: But it's the truth. It's harder now, brother. It is harder now for me than ever before because I know so much more about what not to do. And so I have to go through the process of elimination and all of that. I know the rules, and sometimes I break them because I think that the rules really retard the freedom of expression that I want to exercise in preaching. But no, I have to ruminate and I have to meditate. And it's not an hourly thing with me.

I don't know. If I put it all together by the time I read the text and by the time I internalize it enough so that the text is in me deep enough that I'm able to say it like I could my ABCs, I'm probably talking about well over 50 hours.

Preaching: You've taught preachers for many years. What are two or three critical things about preaching that you'd want to make sure that your students know, or make sure that future pastors understand about preaching?

Smith: Number one, I would tell them: know the text. I know that's simple, but the greatest obstacle to the knowledge of the Bible is the knowledge of the Bible. I contend that the reason why we don't know more about the Bible is because of what we think we already know about the Bible. So approach the text as if you are a little child and you crawl up into the lap of Yahweh and then enter into His cranium and tell Him to teach the lesson of the Bible again to you. This is new, you've never been this way before. You don't know this text. And so just have as a hermeneutical approach a sense you agree with the scripture, but at the same time, you don't know it.

You agree because the scripture is the product of the breath of God, so you agree with God, but you don't know what God is saying. And so that's the first thing I would say because there are students who know a lot about the Bible, bits and pieces, but don't know the canon, don't know the story, don't know how the salvation history, can't take and put the redemptive dots together to arrive at a Christological pneumatology. That is a message that points to Jesus, message that shows the activity of the Spirit, all to glorify God.

So that would be the first thing I would say to them, major in knowing scripture and how scripture is not about the plan of salvation, but about the Man of salvation because the Man carries out the plan. So that would be the first thing I would say to them.

Then I would say, second of all, recognize how unable you are - that this is something you cannot do. Don't enter into this with human confidence and saying, "I could do this because of my expertise in Greek and Hebrew and Aramaic and my studies in theology and all of that." No. As Paul asked the question, "Who is sufficient for these things?" And the implication of course is no one, but our sufficiencies of Christ.

And I think it's important to be given the dual attributes by the Lord of, number one, humility, and number two, authority. Humility in the sense that you rest underneath the power of God, that you are totally dependent upon God, and then authority that the Word that you preach is different than the words from The Old Man and the Sea, Ernest Hemingway, or Gulliver's Travels, or John Milton's Paradise Regained. No, this is the very Word of God.

So it is your humility coupled with God's authority that gets the job done. As Spurgeon would say, when asked, "How did you get so much done? How did you accomplish so much?" He says, "You have to always remember there are two of us that worked," and he meant by that, "I'm at work and the Spirit of God is at work."

Preaching: As an African-American preacher, you move very smoothly back and forth between different ethnic settings and different cultural settings as a preacher. But what do you consider to be some of the characteristics of African-American preaching that really sets it apart, that makes it so effective?

Smith: African-American preaching, number one, is free. It has a free pulpit. The Apostle Paul, of course, was powerful in that he turned his prisons into pulpits. So when you took and chained someone next to Apostle Paul in the prison, he used him as a pulpit and they were converted,

like Onesimus and that kind of thing. Unfortunately, too many pulpits have been turned into prisons in that there is no freedom and you can only say certain things because your tenure is threatened and people want truth, but they want selective truth, truth that has been watered down.

The African American preacher has always had to be prophetic and always had to be free and always had to be almost fearless and to trust in God, even if his tenure or her tenure was threatened. So I would say that's one of the things, to be able to be free to say what Micaiah said to Ahab, "I will only speak what the Lord says, and if the Lord says that you're not coming back here, then you're not coming back here, you're going to die." And of course, that's exactly what Ahab said. That wasn't very popular. John the Baptist's message, it was not very popular, but it was true. So I would say that's the first thing.

And then second of all, there has always been in African- American preaching, a sense of uncontainable joy. Preaching was worship. It was not a job, it was worship. It was joy. It wasn't a matter of, "Well, I got to preach Sunday," but it was, "I get to preach Sunday." It was a privilege and that joy was more than emotion. It was the fact that God has chosen me to represent Him to tell the story. And so joy and this idea of freedom and preaching, those are real distinctives in African-American preaching. They are certainly not monopolized by African-American preaching. No, no. In fact, there is no monopoly when it comes to preaching in any aspect by any ethnicity, but it does, as you said, characterize African-American preaching across the board.

Preaching: And one of the elements in African-American preaching that I think a lot of non-African-Americans don't necessarily understand is the issue of celebration. What is that and why is it important?

Smith: Celebration has to do again with freedom and with joy, both of them. And of course, my context for answering any kind of question about preaching is the Bible. I mean, there is no better reference book than that. So you take Jeremiah and many African-American preachers identify with him. Here he is and he is frustrated, and he has said to God in Jeremiah 20:7, he says, "Oh Lord, you deceive me. And I was deceived." And the word there is *pata* in Hebrew, which means enticed. And it's a reference back to Exodus 22:16 as I recall, where a man, if he takes and violates the virginity of a young lady, has to pay the dowry to the father and then marry the young woman. Enticed is the word. He's really saying that, "You have enticed me. You have sovereignly seduced me." Really?

He is upset. He says, "You have left me to be a laughingstock to people. You said you were going to be with me. And here I am, I'm hung out to dry," and he's implying that, "I've told you I was too young to preach, but you overcame that and told me, 'Don't say that. Before you were even conceived, I knew you.'" And he goes on down the line, he is bad.

But then he gets to verse number nine of Jeremiah 20 and says, "I said I would not make mention of His name anymore, but His word was in my heart like fire shed up in my bones. And I was weary of holding it in. Indeed, I could not." He starts out by saying, "I will not preach anymore," then he ends by saying, "I cannot not preach anymore." Why? Because in the middle, "His word was in my heart like fire shed up in my bones," and he goes on to pounce and sings and all that.

A celebration is more than emotion. Celebration is based upon the impartation of the word of God in the heart. There's nothing to celebrate if it is not Word-driven and Word-fueled at all. So when the preacher preaches the Word and sees how real it has been in the preacher's life and the preacher's congregation, and that God has been faithful. It is not just that Daniel has been in a lion's den, but rather that you have been in a lion's den, the preacher has brought you out. I can never forget what the great William Augustus Jones Jr. said. He said that, "Daniel was never in the lion's den. That's a misnomer." He said, "The lions were in Daniel's den because Daniel slept all night and rested." And he's referring to how God takes and delivers you from your own lion's den experience.

And that gives you great joy because you're not preaching above your experience, as James Earl Massey warned us, but you're preaching out of your experience that the Word is true and you can testify of it, not only because the Bible says so, but also that your experience affirms what the Bible has said. That's what it is. It's celebration in spite of adversity. It's not prosperity theology. No, it's adversity theology. Anybody can celebrate when they're in prosperous times, but you celebrate out of a sense God being with you in adversity. You preach through the storm, so to speak.

Preaching: Are there particular preachers that you really enjoy listening to yourself?

Smith: Oh yeah, I do. And many of them are with the Lord. I really enjoyed listening to James Earl Massey, the one you love so much and appreciated because of his integrity, his Bible-based sermons. Celebration with him, it was not something contrived and it was not something necessarily that looked the same every time he preached, but the celebration was throughout his sermon and not necessarily one that closed on a tumble point at the end of the sermon. But I enjoy listening to him.

I love listening to Ralph West for his biblical narrative preaching. I love listening to H.B. Charles for his verse-to-verse in-depth preaching. Those are just some; there are just so many, and I could mention names that very few people probably would know because they have been in heaven now for 40 and 50 years, and they were not necessarily persons of great theological depth. I shouldn't say it that way. They had great theological depth without going through a theological seminary, and they just studied the Word and flesh and blood did not reveal it to them. But the father gave them the understanding of the text, and some of them had less than if they had a bachelor's degree, and some of them didn't even go to Bible college.

I'm certainly not encouraging people not going to school. I think that's great. But I want to also say that God does use some John the Baptist people who haven't been to school or been ordained or licensed to be powerful preachers.

Preaching: Some that have made the most of what God's given them.

Smith: Exactly. 100% right.

Preaching: What do you find most challenging to you as a preacher? What's the biggest challenge you face? And then what do you enjoy most about preaching?

Smith: Well, what's the most challenging for me is how do I say the same old thing in a fresh new way. I am interested in what Helmut Thielicke calls Docetism, which means to seem or to appear to be, that's referring to their way of trying to protect the divinity of Christ by saying that he seemed to have a body, but he didn't because the *sarx*, that is the body, the flesh for them, was evil. So that denies, of course, the incarnation.

Helmut Thielicke, the German theologian, picks up on that and talks about preaching to the right people at the wrong address. And so that's something I'm really interested in right now. The women going to the tomb and saying to themselves, "Who's going to roll back the stone for us?" And when they get there, of course, the stone has already rolled away, and that angels say to them, "Why are you seeking the living among the dead? He's not here." It's written as they said, "You've come to look for the right man at the wrong address. He's not here."

It's my challenge to be able to preach the truth to people in metaphors, in graphics, in concepts that they can understand, what I call retaining the theological dictionary so that the words, just in case, will always mean what they meant, but changing or extending the theological vocabulary, using other words that say the same thing as those traditional theological words meant. So words like those used by Clarence Jordan, who quotes 2 Corinthians 5:19 where he says that Christ was in the world reconciling the world back to Himself. Reconciling, that's the theological word. In Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Version - not really a version, it's a paraphrase - he says God was in Christ hugging the world back to Himself. He doesn't use the word reconciling. You've got to explain that and that's great and you want to keep that. That needs to be explained.

But he used the word hugging. Everybody knows what a hug is and what a hug provides. There is closeness. A hug is more than a handshake. A handshake means you shake someone's hand and there's space between you. But when you hug someone, in essence, you give them a part of yourself and they get a part of you because there's closeness. So God took it, hugged the world back to Himself so that He becomes a part of us and we become a part of Him in His body and his Spirit lives in us. That's what I want to be able to do. I want to be able to take the theological word and use a word that is contemporary and a word that connects with people that says the same thing that the traditional theological word says, but I say it in words that they can immediately identify with and understand and connect with.

So that's a big challenge for me. I want to be able to preach to the right man at the right address, rather than to have the right message but go to the wrong address and discover that the congregation is not there and they can't connect at all. I've shot over their heads. And the greatest joy to me really is the opportunity just to preach. That sounds, I know, as if it's a given, but the fact that God has entrusted me with the privilege to preach and preach his word to various groups in different locations and settings.

And I know that I am not worthy of that, and I know that I am dispensable and expendable, that God doesn't need me, and yet I get a chance to go to a storefront church - the roof is leaking and the couple of pews they have are splintered, and they have a potbelly stove in the winter and it's cold, and there are about 10 people there. And to be able to preach in a setting like that, to me, that's greater than standing before 5,000 and 6,000 people in a palatial setting. Because if I'm not willing to perform in the storefront church, then I have no right to stand before a great deal of people in a very interesting sanctuary and preach.

That's where I started. That's what defined me. That's where I came from. So I can't ever lose touch with my roots. I've got to be willing to and excited about those kinds of privileges and opportunities.

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