



Warren H. Stewart, Sr. is Senior Pastor of the First Institutional Baptist Church of Phoenix, AZ and committed to holistic Christian ministry.

This excerpt is taken from chapter four of his book Interpreting God's Word in Black Preaching. The material focuses on five hermeneutical principles that Stewart offers for sound preaching that is relatable to one's audience.

PREACHING IN A COMMON TONGUE

The preacher must be able to drive a dump truck if he or she wishes to be successful in creating a living experience with the Word. So Sandy F. Ray likened theologians and biblical scholars to bulldozer operators who unearth the "heavy stuff" of theological treatises, church dogmatics, and exegetical explanations and pile it high and deep for those who would dare seek enlightenment from it. On the other hand, the preacher-pastor, according to Dr. Ray, is the dump-truck driver who makes weekly visits to the "pile," which has been posited by the theologians and biblical scholars, in order to transfer and deposit loads of the "heavy stuff" among the congregation on Sunday morning. Furthermore, Dr. Ray consistently alluded to the fact that there was a distinct division of labor inherent in the processes of unearthing and of transferring the "heavy stuff." In fact Dr. Ray pointed out that theologians and biblical scholars need the 'preacher-pastor because their scholarly expertise inhibits them from being able to translate the "heavy stuff" into understandable language in order that the preaching audience can benefit from it. Thus, the dump-truck driving, preacher-pastor was best gifted to translate and deposit the "heavy stuff" in the hearts and minds of those to whom the Word was directed.

The Word can only be identified with and experienced when it can be understood. Preaching, then, must communicate the Word in the common tongue of those to whom the message is directed. Moreover, he or she who is involved in effective and accurate hermeneutics in preaching must not confuse his or her primary assignment with that of the theologians and biblical scholars. The preacher must be an effective translator of the Word of God or else his or her mission will be defeated immediately after the text is read.

It is also important that the preacher who seeks to translate the Word of God be certain that he or she first understands that Word. The interpreter-proclaimer must have a working knowledge of what one has called "language of origination." This prerequisite understanding of the Word to be preached comes through inspired intuition, disciplined

Bible study, and basic exegetical skills, all of which enlighten the preacher on the message inherent in the Word. Once this understanding takes place, translation of the Word into the common tongue can begin properly.

In this chapter, the matters of preaching as translation, the dangers of language-out-of-context, and the results of preaching in the common tongue will be highlighted in hopes of arriving at an evolving hermeneutical principle.

Preaching as Translation

Preaching as translation involves the deciphering of the Word in such a way that its message may be clearly proclaimed in familiar and understandable language to those to whom it is directed. Preaching as translation encompasses the process of changing an ancient Word into a contemporary Word that will be heard in the particular idiom of the particular group that receives it. The translation aspect of preaching necessitates interpretation, clarity, change, and cultural awareness and sensitivity. Preaching as translation is all about putting into the words and images of our people the Word of God. In this sense, the preacher must become "bilingual," as he or she involves himself or herself in effective and accurate hermeneutics in preaching. The common tongue of the people to whom the Word is directed ought to be the primary language to which God's Word is translated for those particular people. A primary example is black preaching.

Black preaching has been, and still is, effective and vital in our contemporary times because it has addressed black people in their own language with which they are most familiar and comfortable. (The message has not always been comfortable, mind you, but the *language* has been.) The black preacher has most often realized that one of his or her main tasks is that of translating the Word into the common language of his or her people. If the black preacher was not sensitive and effective in accomplishing this task, then he or she was virtually out of a job. Henry Mitchell suggests: "The best of Black preachers today still know intuitively that they have no allegiance to any cultural criteria save the idiom of the people."¹

It has also been pointed out by Dr. Mitchell that the most effective preaching in the black church community as well as in the broader Christian community occurs when the preacher successfully creates the climate in which his or her listeners can identify with the *words* as well as the Word being proclaimed. Mitchell writes:

It is also vital that preachers often identify linguistically with the real congregants, all of them, as opposed to the persons they seek to be, even though the preacher may also be a model of their upward goal.²

In recent years many black preachers have had the opportunity to attend colleges and seminaries in preparation for their pastoral ministries. With this exposure to theological institutions of higher learning has come the necessity to learn and acquire another language uncommon in form (but not in substance) with the language of those to whom most of their preaching will be directed. The language to which I have reference is

the primarily cerebral and abstract vernacular of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant theologians and biblical scholars.

However impressive the theological jargon 'of the classic and contemporary theological guilds is, the truth that needs to be conveyed through the Word must be posited before the people in an understandable tongue. The majority of the constituents—white or black—who hear the Word preached are not familiar with the theological language prevalent on campuses and in lectures and writings emanating from institutions of higher theological learning. Therefore, to preach the Word of God in such a language before one's people would be hardly different from the "glossolalian controversy" addressed by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:2-14. To this end writes Dr. Mitchell: "Black preaching is as effective as it is in the Black community because it has never tried to wage a major war against the culture of the masses of folk."³ In the concluding section of this chapter, the preaching of the three noted black preachers will be cited to further substantiate the contribution of the black preaching tradition in this area.

The danger of using language out of context ought to be recognized by any person engaged in the interpretation and proclamation of the Word. That is what I call "mismatched preaching language." This unfortunate combination consists of the Word of God being interpreted in a language other than the language of those to whom the message is directed. Moreover, this danger does not refer only to theological language being preached before a black congregation. It confronts any "mismatched preaching language" and people. In his book *Black Belief*, Mitchell suggests that the effectiveness of the black preacher has a lot to do with the fact that he or she does not attempt to give his or her people a vocabulary lesson in conjunction with his or her message on Sunday morning. In his exact words, Dr. Mitchell said: "*The professionally educated Black preacher ... will translate his most sophisticated insights into the folk idiom and imagery of their culture, not vice versa* [italics added]."⁴ Any attempt to do otherwise merely alienates and confuses the recipients of "mismatched preaching language" and, at most, vainly impresses the hearers of the language out of context. Identification with the Word cannot take place under these circumstances by a majority of those present.

I was rudely awakened to the danger of language out of context when I was studying religion and philosophy at Bishop College in Dallas, Texas. One of the local pastors annually sponsored a youth revival, affording several of the student ministers an opportunity to preach before a "live" congregation. Providentially, I was asked to preach one night. The sermon ended successfully in my opinion. However, due to my zealotry to share with that "unenlightened" black congregation my recently acquired knowledge, I bulldozed a load or two of egotistically oriented verbiage that included phrases like "the caliginosity of blinding opacity caused by sorrow and self-pity" and "the nigrity of transgressive darkness." After the message, the kind pastor came to me outside of the church and said, "Son, I didn't know you had such a good mind. But you lost my folks! Now, you came back and picked them up at the end, but for a good while you lost my folks. You probably don't like what I'm saying to you, but don't lose the folk!"

"Don't lose the folk" should be a watchword by which all who interpret and preach the Word of God should guard themselves from "mismatched preaching language." Since my conversation with that pastor, I have been in the business of translating the Word preached into the common language of those to whom the message is directed. Again, Paul, one of the most gifted preachers in the history of the church, substantiates this concern for clarity in the pulpit: "For God is not a God of (linguistic) confusion but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33).

The Results of Preaching in the Common Tongue

Powerful preaching is one of the results of preaching in the common tongue of those to whom one's message is directed. Since one definition of power is "authority given to another by a person or group," it follows then that the preacher whose hermeneutics are effective in translating the Word of God will be granted rightful influence as a proclaimer of the gospel by his or her audience. Martin Luther King, Jr., Billy Graham, Edward V. Hill, and many other noted pulpiteers of this era have all been recipients of enormous and far-reaching power, due in part to their ability to translate. The same also is evident in the local church when the preacher-pastor takes very seriously the objective of preaching in the common language of those who will hear his or her message. In essence, the words heard by the congregation are God's Word translated into *their* words. The most perfect example of this consequence of *preaching as translation* is the dynamic message of Jesus Christ, of which one exclaimed, "No man ever spoke like this man!" (John 7:46).

To have one's preaching remembered is a second by-product of preaching in the language of the people. *Preaching as translation* is usually memorable preaching. It is memorable because persons are allowed to experience the Word in understandable terms, symbols, and images. Moreover, common, everyday language in preaching makes for *portable* preaching, preaching that can be carried home. The thoughts and ideas presented by the preacher are easily transported to the hearts and minds of the listeners and, eventually, to their everyday lives. Therefore, one of the most important evaluative comments which a parishioner can make to a preacher-pastor does not address the profundity of the preacher's vocabulary, but the *understandability* of what has been said. Once understanding takes place, remembering the preached Word becomes much easier. The two-thousand-year-old preaching of the Prophet from Nazareth bears out this point on memorable preaching. It is the hope of any of us who preach the Gospel to have at least some thing we say at the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday remembered at noonday on Monday.

The Evolving Hermeneutical Principle

He or she who interprets and preaches the Word must *proclaim the Word in the common tongue of the majority of those who will hear his or her message on any given occasion*. This principle involves translating the Word of God and its truth into the particular idiom of the particular group to whom the message is directed. When this principle is practiced, the danger of preaching in a language out of context and/ or mismatched preaching language is virtually eliminated. It results in powerful and

memorable preaching because it creates the climate whereby the listeners can relate to the vocabulary of the message as well as the Word. In addition, it is patterned after the preaching of Jesus.

Dr. Manuel L. Scott, Sr., is [was] gifted with a noble command of the King's English. There have been occasions when Dr. Scott has been accused of writing in a language uncommon to his own people. His first book, *From a Black Brother*, has been the primary evidence supporting that criticism. As a matter of fact, Dr. Scott says that his first book was an effort to help bridge the gap between Southern Baptists and Negro Baptists. This is not to say that Scott's initial book was written in the common language of Southern Baptists. Nevertheless, in a message in that book dealing with "the temptations of the Negro preaching community," Dr. Scott prophetically denounced the highly visible charades of a segment of the "Black preaching fraternity" in relatively translatable language:

Even a casual observer knows that we have far too many Negro Baptist preachers who bombastically brag and bark, who are exhibitiv and extravagant, frothy and fanfaronadish, grandiloquent and gallery players, ostentatious and obtruse, playboyish and publicity stunts, and who splash and splurge.⁵

In the paragraph below, based on Exodus 2:13, Scott translates the thoughts of Moses after he sees two of his Hebrew brothers in conflict with one another:

Ponder a paraphrase of Moses' perception when he raises the question we are considering: To the two men who are tangling, Moses really is saying: Striking your fellow does not make sense. Both of you are Hebrews. Both of you have a common history in hardship. Both of you are slaves in the Egyptian empire. Both of you are bossed and bought. Both of you are victims of organized and systemic evil. It seems to me that your common circumstances should goad you into some alliance and excite you to cohesion rather than to competition and conflict.⁶

There is no way that any members of the adult black community could miss the message of these words.

Though William A. Jones, Jr., is [was] another leading pulpiteer who utilizes a wide vocabulary to his advantage, his preaching yet involves *preaching as translation*. In his message "In Flesh for Flesh," Jones put into the common tongue of his constituents of the ghetto God's concern for them. He preached:

He's interested in slums and suburbs, preachers and politicians, the needy and the greedy. God's concerned about alleys and avenues, jet planes and jails, sinners and saints. God is upset over nuclear nonsense, political corruption, starvation, malnutrition, economic exploitation, and racial injustice.⁷

Jones, in communicating with his audience about the condition of Lazarus' earthly life, said, "His earthly existence was marked by dreadful poverty. He was a welfare recipient in the most degrading manner."⁸

Putting the preached Word into the language of the majority of those to whom

he preached was one of the most memorable aspects of the preaching of Sandy F. Ray. Doctors and lawyers, politicians and poor people, professionals, and those on fixed incomes heard him gladly. In a sermon entitled "To Keep Footing in a Crumbling Culture," Dr. Ray proclaimed:

One may lose footing by an awkward step. Numerous people in this world are suffering with a handicapping limp as the result of an awkward step. There are "watch-your-step" cautions all about us. ... Parents, teachers, preachers, and the Bible are striving to shield careless, indiscreet, remiss people from stumbling.⁹

Dealing with singing "melodies in a strange land," Ray moves his audience to identify with the circumstances of our enslaved foreparents by using these words:

'How shall we sing?' We have symphonic souls. We have chirping, chanting spirits. We are on a rhythmic mission. Singing and praising God cheer us along the weary way. We sing in strange lands, difficult situations, and horrible conditions...

Our songs may not be suited to a choir or a professional chorus. They may not be in a church or a temple. They may be in a lonely apartment, basement, on a farm, in a factory, a hospital room, an office, in the air, on land, or on sea. The soul has a song for all of life's situations.¹⁰

In speaking about visionaries and dreamers, based on Joseph who was cast into a hole by his jealous brothers, Sandy Ray translated into everyday language the lesson from Joseph's experience:

Dreamers must be cautious about where and to whom they tell their dreams. It is disconcerting to tell dreams which we cannot sell.... Nondreamers do not buy dreams quickly. Good leaders learn to drop dreams as they prepare the market to sell them. Young preachers must observe this carefully and prayerfully. Do not marshal dreams out too early. It is a waste in a dreamless society.¹¹

Preaching in the common tongue of those who will receive the Word leads to their edification as well as inspiration. If it is indeed the preacher's lot to communicate to the world that God is actively involved in its holistic liberation, then preaching must be done in a language that can be understood by any particular group to whom the message is directed at any given time. The Word that the preacher must proclaim is too vital and vivacious for its life to be stymied by egotistical verbosity or linguistic insensitivity. As alluded to in Sandy Ray's illustration that began this chapter, the preacher, and especially the preacher-pastor, must recognize his or her primary responsibility as translator. Then and only then can the Word be powerfully and memorably communicated to the people in a common tongue.

SUMMARY

In the preceding pages, I have identified evolving hermeneutical principles and ideas that are evident in black preaching at its best. This was done not merely to accentuate the interpretive process that has been involved in black preaching since antebellum days but also to illustrate the significant contribution that hermeneutics in

black preaching can make to all who preach the Word of God.

Let us review the five basic hermeneutical principles that are a product of this study.

Hermeneutical Principle Number One

He or she who interprets and preaches the Word must *know God to be actively involved in the continuous process of humankind's holistic liberation.*

Hermeneutical Principle Number Two

He or she who interprets and preaches the Word must *identify with the Word in such a way that the Word will both support and challenge those to whom the message is directed.*

Hermeneutical Principle Number Three

He or she who interprets and preaches the Word must *allow the Holy Spirit working through his or her gifts and talents to create a living experience with the Word in himself or herself first, and then in the lives of those to whom the message is directed.*

Hermeneutical Principle Number Four

He or she who interprets and preaches the Word must proclaim the Word in the common tongue of the majority of those who will hear his or her message on any given occasion.

Hermeneutical Principle Number Five

He or she who interprets and preaches the Word must *proclaim the Word as dialogue with the audience and utilize the voice and body to communicate interpretively one's message and its meaning.*

When these hermeneutical principles are coupled with sound exegetical homework, one should be able to preach the Word effectively and accurately in any context, the end result being preaching that it is relevant and understandable. This, then, would enable the preacher to accomplish the directive initially given by the apostle Paul to his son in the ministry, Timothy, and found in 2 Timothy 2:15: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." Rightly handling the word of truth" is the primary responsibility of all of us who preach. That is what hermeneutics in preaching is all about. Therefore, hermeneutics *is* an essential tool for telling the Story.

¹ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1970), p. 29.

² Henry H. Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1977), pp. 100-101.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Belief* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1977), p 13.

⁵ Manuel L. Scott, *From a Black Brother* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 80.

⁶ Manuel L. Scott, *The Gospel for the Ghetto*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973), pp. 77-78.

⁷ William A. Jones, Jr., "In Flesh for Flesh," *God in the Ghetto*, (Elgin, Ill.: Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 1979), p. 131.

⁸ Jones, "The Horrors of Hell," *God in the Ghetto*, p. 143.

⁹ Sandy F. Ray, "To Keep Footing in a Crumbling Culture," *Journeying Through a Jungle* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), p. 49.

¹⁰ Ray, "Melodies in a Strange Land," *Journeying*, p. 61.

¹¹ Ray, "Take a Little Honey," *Journeying*, p. 96.