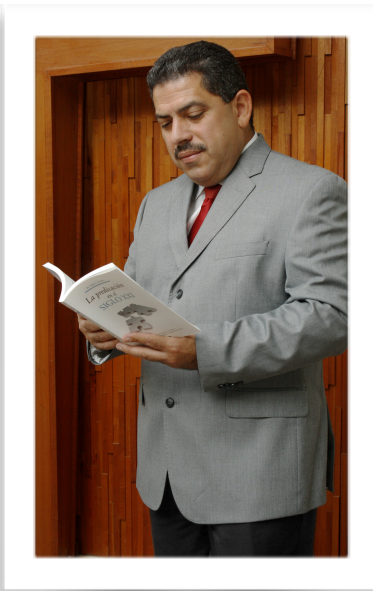


# What makes preaching “biblical”?

by Pablo A. Jiménez<sup>1</sup>



My first reaction toward the phrase “biblical preaching” was to think that it was a tautology. For me, preaching is mainly the exposition of the Gospel in fidelity to the Scriptures. However, after thinking it over, I realized that there are specific criteria by which we can call certain style of preaching “biblical”. Thus, the question that I will address in this paper is “What makes a style of preaching 'biblical'?”

***Biblical preaching occurs when there is a positive correlation between the content, the function and the form of the sermon and the biblical text.*** To put it in a different way, it is “to shape sermons in ways coherent with the dynamic, multiform address of that [divine] word.”<sup>2</sup>

Let us explore now the elements that make preaching “biblical.”

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<sup>2</sup> Don M. Wardlaw, ed., *Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 61-62.

## Content

A biblical sermon presents today, in a relevant way, theological insights that come out of a *valid interpretation of the text*.<sup>3</sup>

As we know, the Bible is a text. As such, from a hermeneutic standpoint, it is detached from its authors and its original audiences. So, the Bible—as a text—has a certain degree of autonomy from its primary contexts. When the modern interpreter reads the Scriptures, the biblical text addresses her or him in a particular way. The reader, then, has new insights about the meaning of the text; the text has triggered a fresh interpretation of its message according to its *surplus of meaning*.<sup>4</sup>

These new insights about the text must be validated by the critical work of the interpreter. By this I mean that the fresh ideas triggered by the new reading of the text must be tested against *two* criteria. The *first* one is the canon. The Bible is *one* book and, as such, it has major theological themes running from Genesis to Revelation. Our new insights about the text must be congruent with the thematic axes that we find in the Bible.

The *second* criterion against which our new reading of the text must be contrasted is the particular theological outlook of the text. The biblical writers addressed different situations, reinterpreting their traditions in the light of their time. Therefore, each biblical document has a particular theological outlook.

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<sup>3</sup> José Severino Croatto, “La contribución de la hermenéutica bíblica a la Teología de la Liberación” *Cuadernos de Teología* VI, (no. 4, 1985): 45-69. [E.T. “Biblical Hermeneutics in the theologies of liberation” in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983): 140-168.]

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Once we have tested our new insights of the text against the key theological outlook of the biblical document, then we have an interpretation that is valid. This does not mean that it is the only valid interpretation nor the only possible interpretation, but that it is a legitimate new reading of the text. Then, we can proceed to consider the hermeneutical implications of the text or our modern audience.

Notice that I have defined content in terms of the theological claim of the text. Sometimes we hear sermons where the preacher relays heavily in the biblical story. However, at the end the text is interpreted in the light of a amorphous theological concept that covers everything like a big umbrella. This is usually the case with the concept of love. Some preachers will find a romantic pseudo-Johannine concept of love in every text of the Bible. This, instead of an expository sermon, is a “generic” one that is not true to the Scriptures or relevant to the audience.

## Function

The biblical texts were written with specific intentions. The authors wanted their audiences to do something. To achieve their purposes they employed forms and rhetorical devices that provoked different reaction in the hearers. Although the original intention of the authors is now largely lost, the form of the biblical documents still evokes particular feelings in contemporary audiences, provoking different reactions. Some texts give a word of judgment, others a word of hope, still others a word of transformation. ***The reaction that the text seeks to cause in the audience is what I call the “function” of the text.*** A sermon proves to be biblical when it has the same function that the text has.

The function of a text can be determined with certain accuracy through form criticism. Then, through the ***a correlation of social locations***,<sup>5</sup> we can find points of contact between the experiences depicted in the text and our audience, making the function of the text specially relevant to the contemporary hearers.

Although this hermeneutical method can be employed in almost any context, it is particularly useful in oppressed communities,<sup>6</sup> where the politics of domination, the extreme poverty and the hope for a new order resemble so closely the situations portrayed in the Bible.

Another important element is the vantage point from which the preacher tells the biblical story. It is really difficult to identify with a preacher that always takes a distant position as the authoritative voice in the story. The preacher must identify him or herself with the congregation. Furthermore, the preacher must practice what he or she preaches, adopting “a total style of life which embodies the spirit of the crucified Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

## Form

It is not without certain reluctance that I include form as a criterion for biblical preaching. The preacher should master first the traditional forms

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<sup>5</sup> Justo L. González & Pablo A. Jiménez. **Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching.** Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005, 44-46. See also, Walter Brueggemann, “As the text makes sense”, ***The Christian Ministry*** 14 (Summer 1983): 8.

<sup>6</sup> Justo L. González and Catherine G. González, ***Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed*** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 16. See Also Elsa Tamez, ***Bible of the Oppressed*** (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), 66-67 and Croatto, op.cit.,59-60.

<sup>7</sup> William Baird, “Biblical Preaching as Incarnational Preaching”, ***Lexington Theological Quarterly*** 16 (January 1981): 111.

and the deductive logic before going ahead with the design of inductive sermons and experimental forms. Having made this warning, I should say that ***ideally the biblical preacher should make the most of the text by designing the sermon in the form of the text.***

The reason to design sermons in the form of the text is that the function of the text is achieved, in part, by the movement of the form of the text.<sup>8</sup> Let us take, for example, the Psalm of Lament. The function of the lament is to give hope to the person that prays the psalm, restoring the person to the faithful community. By and large, the lament achieves its function by a sudden movement from lament to praise. The movement from hurt to joy reassures the person about God's loving concern, solidarity and sense of justice. Then, the one who prays can experience a healing feeling of hope in God's fidelity.

By far, it is easier to achieve the function of the Psalm of Lament if we incorporate in our sermon a movement from lament to praise.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, ***preaching is truly biblical when there is a positive correlation between the content, the function and the form of the text.***<sup>9</sup>

The task of the biblical preacher is, therefore, to let the text speak,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, ***Creative Preaching: Finding the Words*** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Leander E. Keck, ***The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching*** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980) and Achtemeier, op.cit., 61.

<sup>10</sup> Richard C. White, "Building Biblical Sermons", ***Lexington Theological Quarterly*** 18 (April 1983): 43- 51.

allowing the text to witness about God to the congregation. The preacher seeks to present the theological insights of the text in such a lively way that they may lead those who hear the Word to become closer to God.

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