

SPEAKING

from the
Heart

Preaching

With

Passion

Richard F. Ward

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Speaking from the Heart
Preaching With Passion

By Ward, Richard F.

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*I dedicate this book to my parents,
Dalton and Marjory Ward,
for they first taught me how to speak,
to learn, and to write.*

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SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

Foreword

The longest walk in the world for preachers is the journey from the pulpit back to the chancel when we sense we have failed to convey the fire of the Spirit in our hearts. Usually, it was not that the sermon outline was wrong or the theology faulty. It was, instead, the way we felt ourselves blocking the message, obstructing the energies of the Spirit which had initially mobilized our insight and urgency. It is as though the words we delivered were only the skeleton of the living, embodied truth which had filled us with passion in our study.

Richard Ward identifies with all of us who have ever made that long walk back from the pulpit to the chancel. He has himself known the experience, and he recounts what it was like in the pages that follow.

But he does more than share the vulnerability which is common to all of us who preach the gospel. He develops an historical, theological and practical understanding of how we can embody the good news that we yearn to tell to our congregations. He does this while avoiding two of the most common pitfalls in our efforts to improve sermon delivery:

1. Reducing the issue to nothing more than a matter of technique.
2. Ignoring technique all together.

Because it is easy to fall into either of these traps, it is worth looking at both of them before we begin to consider Ward's balanced approach.

The temptation to reduce preaching solely to technique is especially appealing in an age of high tech solutions. We reason that surely there must be some system that can assure our success in the pulpit, just as there are new computer programs to do everything from reorganizing our finances to diagnosing the rattle in our car to analyzing interstellar phenomena. But, in fact, method alone is never sufficient to communicate the life-transforming power of the gospel. Having listened to hundreds of preachers over the last fifteen years, I can call to mind dozens of ministers whose theology was sound, whose voices were clear and well supported, whose gestures and inflection were exemplary, and whose sermons still fell flat.

When their peers analyzed what had gone wrong, they often found themselves initially baffled. After all, everything was technically correct, including the exposition of the Scripture, selection of illustrations, articulation and the coherence of the outline. But in the last analysis there was no passion, no empathic identification with the pain of human life, no sense of the irrepressible power of the risen Christ animating the words, gestures, facial expression, and inflection of the preacher. Instead, the mechanics of public presentation, polished as they were, served to mute the vitalities of the Spirit within the preacher.

The other distortion in the delivery of sermons, equally deleterious, is a failure to employ the essential methods of clear and effective public speech and to justify that failure by appealing to absolute reliance on the Spirit. Words are mumbled, gestures constricted, and there is about the entire presentation a sense that the preacher has not taken seriously the exercise of the gifts of thought and skill which God expects all of us to use.

How then can we draw upon the best methods of public speaking without succumbing to a methodological aridity?

This is exactly the question which Richard Ward answers with grace and wisdom in the following pages. There is no simple way to summarize the development of his process, but I believe preachers, both those with years of experience and those just

beginning, will find here a way of understanding the task of public proclamation that is rooted in the Bible and theology.

The title of the book, *Speaking from the Heart: Preaching with Passion*, identifies Ward's great theme and names the hope we have for our own witness to the gospel: to speak from our hearts to the hearts of our listeners. We do not mean this in some narrow privatistic sense of what we know to be true simply as individuals. But we want to speak from the "heart strangely warmed," from the core of what the Spirit has revealed and done to us as creatures of God in need of hope and healing. We have known God's restoring power in our lives, otherwise we would not be preachers; but the day to day, hour to hour pastoral demands of deaths, illnesses, family crises, budgetary problems and congregational squabbles can easily quench the Spirit's flames within us.

This book offers practical help to remove whatever obstructs the working of God in our speech and bodily expression. Ward's solutions fuse together the best principles of public speaking with historical and theological insight. The result is that the reader is not misled into either the distortion of a method without spirituality or a spirituality without method.

Ward draws on the discipline of performance studies to help us preachers claim our continuity with the early Christian preachers, and to help us acknowledge the sources of personal experience which influence us every time we stand to declare the gospel. Rather than set historical and personal approaches to preaching against each other, he builds a structure for understanding how tradition and the preacher's experience are interwoven in effective proclamation. We come to see that the appropriate use of our selves and our life experience can be a continuation of the rhetorical and homiletical strategies of the early church, particularly as manifest in the ministry of Paul the apostle.

The result of Ward's historical analysis and contemporary homiletical reflection is to give us a renewed interior confidence so that when we walk from the pulpit to the chancel, we can trust more completely that the Spirit has moved through us in ways that can reshape our listeners' lives.

To summarize his work: Ward assists preachers in finding a way to *embody* the insights of contemporary homiletical theory as living

qualities in our preaching. We do not tell stories to entertain. We do not draw on personal experience to display ourselves. Rather we engage these methods as an extension of the Spirit's reaching out to the stories and experience of our listener's lives in order that they might be transformed by the saving power of God.

Thus, Ward's book, while it is filled with practical exercises and suggestions, is more than a text in homiletical method. It is a work of practical spirituality for the preacher. It is practical in its down-to-earth examples and exercises. Yet it presents a homiletical spirituality by showing how these examples and exercises continue the tradition of proclamation that began in the witness of the early church.

I hope that this book will take its place in the larger theological movement of our age which seeks to realize more completely the liberation of human beings to claim all that God has intended for their lives: compassion, justice, peace, the saving power of grace. Preachers whose delivery incarnates these qualities will proclaim the good news of Christ in ways that liberate their listeners.

As preachers appropriate Ward's insights into their own delivery they will find themselves lifted up as they walk back from the pulpit to the chancel. For they will sense that by speaking from the heart, that by preaching with passion, they have helped their congregation to see and feel and hear with renewed amazement: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

Thomas H. Troeger

Iliff School of Theology