



FOREWORD BY HERSHAEL W. YORK

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PASSION
IN THE
PULPIT

HOW TO EXEGETE
THE EMOTION OF SCRIPTURE

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AUTHENTICITY, HYPOCRISY, AND HEARTFELT PREACHING

For those who deliver the Word, the question arises: How do you maintain heartfelt preaching when your feelings contradict the emotions of a text? Is it hypocritical to preach anyway? Certainly exercising restraint and wisdom when incorporating emotive strategies is essential for avoiding manipulation. But how do you do so?

Hogan and Reid correctly caution, “Of the three means of persuasion *pathos* is most open to blatant manipulation. Without a balanced interest in *logos* and *ethos*, *pathos* can easily slide into dangerous preoccupation of creating effect for effect’s sake.”¹ Part of the challenge is that effective communicators instinctively know how to move audiences emotionally. Doing so correctly, however, requires a tremendous respect for the intent of Scripture and a sacred commitment to internalizing the truth and the accompanying mood brought out of the text. Indeed, the best way to express the pathos of a text without violating the sincerity of your heart is to internalize the Scripture before delivering it.

Just as manipulative as imposing a foreign mood on a passage of Scripture is ignoring the inherent tone when it is obvious in a pericope. My personal

observation is that few sermons are in danger of competing with the spirit of a text due to excessive drama or flamboyance. More common is the tendency to be dull and boring in the pulpit. For every preacher who falsely moves his audience, there are a hundred others who will never wake them up! We must acknowledge that preaching with *no* passion is just as manipulative as preaching with the *wrong* passion. Unless we conclude that the Bible is monotonous and wearisome, there is no excuse for flat, dry preaching.

As a herald of good news, the preacher must be subservient to the design of a text's *logos* and the tone of its *pathos*. Ironically, many who would never alter what a passage of Scripture means unknowingly alter its tone in an effort to be authentic. Certainly, the alignment of our personal disposition to the corresponding mood of the Bible is always preferable for the preaching moment. Sometimes, however, our commitment to prioritize the text will require the intentional minimization of any current impulses and feelings that compete with the designed tone of our pericope. When forced to choose between being true to ourselves and being true to the text, we must always choose inspired Scripture.

WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE PREACHING

It had been a long but wonderful week for me. Wrapped gifts covered our living room floor and suitcases lay open at the door of our closet. Our honeymoon had come and gone and it was everything my new bride and I hoped it would be. After being out of the pulpit for two Sundays, I could not wait to return and address the congregation that sent us off so well.

Before making my way to the worship center I gathered my thoughts in my office and noticed the healthy stack of mail piled atop my desk. All of that could wait, I reasoned, but the top envelope caught my eye because it only had my name written across the front.

Something inside me knew better, but I took the bait. As I read, anger began to well up in my heart. The letter was from a woman known for being harsh and today was no different. To her, my excitement over getting married was a perverted embarrassment. This opened the door for her to include a litany of other complaints and criticisms regarding my leadership of the church.

By the time I finished reading, my blood was boiling. It was now just two minutes before our worship service began. My text for the day was 1 John 4:7–8: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone

who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

How are we to handle difficult situations like these? In a matter of moments I went from a warm embodiment of my text for the day to being a defensive, self-righteous warrior with eyes aflame. Nothing in me wanted to communicate or elicit love as I preached that day. What was I to do? Before me lay a fundamental choice of priority. Either I would choose transparency in order to be true to my feelings, or I would choose the beauty and grandeur of my assigned text. Every impulse within me gravitated toward the former, wishing to enact revenge for such a calloused, poorly timed critique. Despite my personal ambitions, it was the latter that my people needed most. The only way to deliver, however, was to deny myself in order to magnify the text. By God’s grace, I made the right choice.

Because preaching has a specific goal determined by the intent and design of Scripture, those of us who preach should relentlessly guard against any outside hindrances that contradict our prescribed directives. Though we cannot control how we feel at the moment of sermon delivery, we can control what we communicate and, to a large extent, how we make others feel. Our passion in the pulpit ought to reflect the text rather than reveal our current circumstances. When our immediate mood is contrary to the pathos of Scripture, we must choose to honor the emotive design of our passage.

Admittedly, such a choice is never ideal. Choosing between personal pathos and the passion of the biblical record diminishes the joy of preaching significantly. Yet, these moments often reveal whether our allegiance to preach the text is mere lip service or genuine conviction. Our greatest priority must be embodying and eliciting the pathos of Scripture rather than our temporary, contradictory emotions. Altering your personal disposition for the sake of interpretive fidelity is not a form of manipulation. Intentionally yielding to the cognitive and emotional impact of your chosen text is essential during the preparation and delivery phases of sermon exposition. Honoring textual meaning and tone, rather than personal transparency, becomes the distinguishing factor between persuasion and manipulation. In short, when you don’t feel like preaching, do it anyway!

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temporary, contradictory emotions.**

Acknowledging the limitations of personal authenticity should not be seen as an endorsement of hypocrisy in the pulpit. Though ignoring competing emotions is sometimes necessary in order to capture the spirit of a text, doing so should be viewed as the exception rather than the rule. The best scenario for sustained pulpit health is the complete alignment of the Bible's passion and the preacher's heart. Even as Scripture determines and drives the emotion of every sermon, it remains equally true that every text should alter the messenger's disposition too. Just as the Bible's *logos* compels us to yield our beliefs to divine revelation, so too the Bible's *pathos* should motivate us to yield our personal disposition to the manner in which God speaks.

There is a great difference between refusing to submit to the content of Scripture and being temporarily distracted due to an unforeseen circumstance. These abrupt impositions may occasionally force our hand, but preaching truth that does not resonate within should be rare instead of commonplace. Sustained delineation between the response the Bible seeks and the reality we feel is not only hypocritical, but also dangerous. Persuading others without first being moved ourselves reduces preaching to a stage play featuring a whitewashed tomb. Continually preaching with transcendent emotions that are foreign to personal experience will destroy the integrity of prolonged ministry.

Planning and utilizing strategies to achieve emotional goals is both permissible and necessary, but doing so without first embracing the full impact of the Bible is not. The priority of preaching truth through God's personality does not negate the necessity of modifying our own personality at times. Hollifield captures the importance of our experience with the Word:

How the preacher feels about his text will influence how he preaches it and how the people react emotionally and otherwise. As the preacher begins to feel the spirit of the text, he is at a pivotal point in his sermon preparation. While recovering the mood of the text, he is establishing an emotional framework within which he will recreate the text for his audience and preach his sermon. In that moment when the text impresses him emotionally, he will recall related thoughts, feelings, and experiences.²

A prerequisite to effectively preaching to others is acknowledging that the Bible is first "the supreme preacher to the preacher."³

THE NEED FOR HEARTFELT PREACHING

The most powerful preaching surfaces when the mood of a text so captures the preacher that he declares its truth from a sincere heart. Thankfully, no dichotomy exists between accurate interpretation and altruistic motivation. By yielding to the emotional energy of Scripture during sermon preparation, genuine proclamation from the heart becomes possible. Sincerity alone will not make a sermon more biblical, but it will make it more effective. The best preaching takes place when the messenger's heart resonates in harmony with the logos and pathos of a biblical text. Dr. Vines wrote about this urgency decades ago:

[Many preachers] have become so professional, academic, and intellectual that they do not seem to feel what they say. There even seems to be an aversion to any expression of emotion in the pulpit. This affliction is not limited to liberal preachers. Many conservatives suffer the same malady. Many of us are too casual and matter-of-fact in our preaching. This kind of preaching will not move modern men. . . . Sermons actually are born in the heart. Though the preacher gets his sermon from the Bible, he must bring it to life in his heart. Though he may prepare his message on paper, he must deliver it from his heart.⁴

So what is the remedy? How can we position ourselves to honor the meaning and spirit of the Bible while also preaching with a genuine heart? How can we avoid the cold, lifeless, intellectual pursuit of a sermon that sometimes dilutes the heat of our delivery? Likewise, how can we guard against projecting the heat of passion even though the flame of truth is notoriously absent?

Commit to Personal Integrity

Though the focus of this volume is primarily the importance of sermon pathos, the significance of ministerial ethos should not be overlooked. While Aristotelian ethos was more perceived than reality, the personal integrity of a minister will have a profound impact on his sermon delivery. With

regard to pathos, our goal is more than projecting the tone of our chosen pericope, though it can never be less. Instead, we should be deeply gripped by the emotional gravity of the truth we proclaim as it marinates into our lives. Occasionally altering our circumstantial mood is no substitute for the sustained, weekly sanctification that accompanies wrestling with a text as its initial recipient.

In other words, before we preach to others we want to respond thoroughly to the Spirit's beckoning within a text. Adjusting our lives to the truth we uncover prevents us from becoming unmoved movers who seek to impact others without first being touched ourselves. Before we animate our personality *with* the text, we must first align our lives *to* the text.

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Our goal must be more than putting a sermon together. Character demands that we pursue an encounter with the living God of Scripture and that we adjust our lives according to His directives. A failure to do so will lead to more messages with a manufactured pathos that does not inwardly affect us. Without integrity, we will justify foreign tactics that arrest the attention of listeners while we yawn in the background. Doing so entices us to glory more in the response of our congregations than the reaction of our own hearts. We cannot settle for the spiritual resurrection of others while remaining content within the grave of our private complacency. Ultimately, ethos represents the thin line between performing in the pulpit and embodying the spirit of the text for the sake of our own soul as well as the souls of our listeners. How can we strive to preach with personal integrity?

First, *we must remain willing to address the known sin in our lives*. The call to be blameless as we lead the church of the Lord Jesus does not have perfection as its target, but a continued commitment to respond appropriately when confronted with our deficiencies (1 Tim. 3:2). Certainly, this must be true about a minister's life in general. In addition, however, throughout the process of sermon preparation, a preacher with integrity will pray, repent of sin, yield to biblical applications, and commit to live differently after

traversing through his text. Long before he asks the Lord to appropriate truth for his future audience, a virtuous minister will plead for his personal transformation.

Second, *we should approach the text without contrived goals or agendas*. Our assignment is to let Scripture speak as intended by its authors. Forcing a passage into a sermon series or advancing a chosen theme within the church violates the most basic premise of expositional interpretation. The structure, tone, and message of every sermon ought to originate within the text itself. Pulpit ethos eliminates the prerogative of bringing a sermon to the Bible in search of verses to support it. Standing as herald of what the King has said must supersede our drive to make a name for ourselves or to appear creative and clever.

Seek the Illumination of the Spirit

Before we seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit within a preaching pericope, our doctrine of the Bible's inspiration takes center stage. Though the former is impossible apart from the latter, we must not assume that the two function in the same way. Heisler carefully delineates inspiration as "a completed, one-time event that guaranteed and safeguarded truth, whereas illumination as a continuing work of the Spirit promises guidance in truth but does not guarantee the outcome as 'infallible' as the doctrine of inspiration does."⁵ Because illumination that is wrought by the Holy Spirit will never contradict the inspiration that preceded it, we must position ourselves within the boundaries of authorial intent in order to receive the guidance of the Spirit. Textual implications and significances naturally flow out of the meaning within a passage of Scripture. When we settle on the correct interpretation of our text, the Holy Spirit's illumination guides us to use what we learned in the real world, first in our own lives and then in the lives of those who hear us preach. How can we position ourselves to hear the gentle impressions of the Trinity's third member?

First, *we must spend ample time in prayer*. Remember the words of E. M. Bounds, who warned, "Without unceasing prayer, the anointing never comes to the preacher. Without perseverance in prayer, the anointing, like over-kept manna, breeds worms."⁶ Pray as you interpret, asking the Lord to help you avoid faulty understanding and interpretation. As the world of the text becomes clear, ask God for a grasp of contemporary intersections with the initial application for the first audience, or the world in front of the text. As you

begin to appreciate the importance of the passage for today's world, petition the Lord for laser-like precision as you work to identify the most relevant highlights necessary for your congregation. All the while, continually check your heart and lay it bare before your heavenly Father. Humble yourself while seeking wisdom to yield to all the truth that you find in your study.

Next, *pay close attention to the text's initial emotional impact on your heart.* Ask God to do more than help you locate the pathos within your passage. Instead, beckon Him to inspire you in the same way you will later motivate your hearers. Cross-check your mood as you soak in the meaning and tone you are studying. Pay close attention to your instincts as you respond to the verses at hand, realizing your reactions may reinforce or distract from the intended outcome of the book's author. Linger long enough to embody the spirit of the text or, when you cannot, seek the Lord as to why. List the primary emotions you feel to see how many correspond to the intention of the text. Think carefully about what prompting you need in order to arrive at the revealed passion in your pericope, realizing you may utilize the same strategy as you deliver the message to others.

Stand in the Flow of the Text

As you begin to assemble the sermon, stand in the momentum of both the meaning and spirit of the message you will share. Organize your thoughts to mirror their progression in the passage and follow the ebb and flow of the identified tone. Remember, your goal is to say what the text says in the same way it says it. If the author reveals the main idea and then proves his thesis, do the same. If, however, his ideas culminate toward a watershed moment of revelation, seek to build the same sense of anticipation as you work toward the central focus of the text. Follow the reasoning and logic of the text and attempt to re-create its pathos throughout your presentation. The outline and development will be most powerful if it reflects the Holy Spirit's original design.

The preparation stage is key for preaching without transcendent emotions that are in the focal passage but absent from your genuine temperament. Standing in the flow of the text involves more than understanding what the text says; it is deeply feeling the impact with which God speaks. Do not settle for the mere comprehension of ideas. Embody them to the degree that you receive God's truth for yourself before disseminating it to others. The force of the text in your own life is a necessary precursor to unleashing the power of God's Word into the lives of others. When unexpected interruptions force

you to choose between ministerial transparency and accurately handling Scripture, by all means prioritize the Bible's message. Yet, work hard to avoid the choice altogether. Use your study as a place to internalize the spirit of your text and step to the podium without losing the empathy God gives you for each sermon. Function as a channel through which God can speak without losing the potency of His words.

A WORD OF CAUTION

The burden of preaching every week creates unique challenges for ministers that do not surface in other professions. Ideally, these hurdles would not diminish our resolve to preach the Word or our effectiveness in doing so. Unfortunately, wrestling through these realities is as much a part of ministry as the sacred responsibility of answering the initial call to serve. Fallen messengers will not always be able to extol the beauties and intricacies of Scripture from an undivided heart. This reality falls short of what congregants need from their leaders, and even what we aspire for ourselves. When the grandeur of preaching the Word is temporarily lost on us, it is imperative that we continue to hold high the primacy of *thus saith the Lord*.

A failure to accurately divide the Word because of the imposition of temporary intrusions is also an oversight regarding the eternity of our calling. Because the Bible does not return void, we must stay true to the task of proclaiming both the content and spirit of its words regardless of how we feel (Isa. 55:11).

At the same time, however, we must be equally diligent for our personal encounters with the Lord as we walk through His ancient text. Doing so will not shield us from the assaults of the world, but our consistent transformation will produce the fruit of longevity and integrity.

IN THE PULPIT

With Jerry Vines

I was in the mood to do anything but preach. But I really had no choice. I was the new pastor at Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama, the largest church in the state. Having recently moved to the state, I was invited to preach at the Alabama Baptist State Evangelism Conference to

be held at Dauphin Way. I was more in the mood to have a root canal, but preach I must.

My emotional mood was driven by a number of factors. Some denominational leaders were not happy I was there. The Southern Baptist Convention was in the beginning years of what has now been named “The Conservative Resurgence.” A number of us were concerned about the liberal drift in our denomination. With God’s help we were seeking to return our denominational ship to its conservative moorings. We were not well received by many of the powers that be. I was “on the spot,” so to speak.

There was a great deal of emotional pressure around the conference itself. Some of the most respected preachers in the convention were on the program. To know they would be in the audience didn’t help my emotional state either! Talk about intimidated. I approached the hour I was assigned to preach with fear and trepidation. I actually dreaded it.

Finally, the hour itself was not conducive to preaching. I was assigned the slot right after lunch. Preaching to a group of preachers after they are well fed is not the most fun thing to do! And, on top of that, the music was dull and the conference was rather dry. Things were dragging along.

My time came. I walked to the pulpit, read my Scripture passage, and began my message. I am sure it was obvious to all that I was struggling. The words didn’t come easy. My personal emotions were overwhelming. Then it happened. The Holy Spirit took over. The pathos of the Scripture passage overcame my own trembling, anxious emotions. Whereas I felt like doing anything else but preach beforehand, I was so gripped by the subject and the corresponding pathos of the Scripture passage that I felt as if I was lifted out of my own emotional doldrums and carried to a new level of illumination and pathos. At times during the sermon I felt as if I was on the outside witnessing what was happening, so greatly did the Scripture impact me.

The sermon was entitled “Our Ascended Lord.” I preached it in January of 1976. From that day to this there has scarcely been a week that someone has not mentioned to me the message and its impact on their lives. I take no credit for it. I am keenly aware that it was one of those occasions when the Holy Spirit chose to overcome my human frailties and convey the logos and pathos of Scripture to the listeners.⁷

Though not as dramatic, there have been many other times when I didn’t feel like preaching. Like Adam finding an angry letter in his church office, I’ve had my share of unkind letters and emails. Several times I was confronted just before the preaching service by church members who had any number of requests, complaints, and cutting little things to say. Such thoughtlessness

doesn't put the preacher in the best of emotional moods to declare the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8).

There were times when I preached in poor health. Probably more times than I should have. Battling a bad cold, a sore throat, recovering from an illness, or just feeling bad in general doesn't create the best emotional atmosphere in which to deliver God's Word.

Family issues can be a factor as well. A child going through a health crisis, struggling at school or rebelling in various ways doesn't create a positive setting for preaching. Having a strong disagreement with your spouse doesn't get you on Hallelujah Square either. Now, don't look at me with that "spiritual" look. We've all been there. When you and your mate have just had a strong disagreement on the way to church, you may not be in the best frame of mind and heart to preach a passage like "love one another" (John 13:34)!

Aristotle even suggested that old age is a factor in one's speaking. The Greek philosopher certainly has my attention as I continue to preach in my eighties. Aristotle even wrote that we should quit speaking while we are still at the top of our game. He suggests our speaking may be "inferior in energy to what it had been," and that the speaker "will do well to sound a retreat and gain the harbor while his vessel is still undamaged."⁸ I certainly understand the counsel. In the years of old age one certainly may not be able to preach with the fervor of earlier years. But, for all the older men reading this, don't dock your vessel into the harbor just yet.

There is abundant evidence that those who spoke God's Word in the Bible experienced emotional moods that were not conducive to preaching with Word-driven pathos. Consider the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. If ever a prophet of God experienced contrary emotions, it was he. As he indicates, he felt himself "deceived . . . a laughingstock." So stressed was he emotionally he determined to quit. He declares, "I will not mention Him, or speak any more in His name." Then he shouts, "There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jer. 20:7-9 *ESV*). The pathos of God's Word overcame his own emotional distress.

Consider another example from the New Testament. All of the evidence indicates that after his experience in Athens Paul was not in a suitable emotional state to preach the gospel in Corinth. The sneering of some who heard him and the small number who received his message surely took its toll on his emotional well-being (Acts 17:32-33). He gives us some indication of the turbulence going on in his soul as he made the journey to preach in Corinth. "I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling"

(1 Cor. 2:3). Not the ideal mood to preach, would you say? Oh, but read the next part: “and my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (v. 4). The divinely inspired pathos of the Word itself overwhelmed his own feelings of emotional inadequacy.

The pathos of the preaching text can certainly do the same in those times when we are not in the best mood to preach. Paul admonished the young preacher Timothy, “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2). Primarily Paul was saying, take advantage of every opportunity to preach, whether it is favorable or not. Perhaps it may also indicate we are to preach when we feel like it and when we don’t. Even in the worst of circumstances the pathos of Scripture can be conveyed by the Holy Spirit to our listeners, regardless of how we feel.

So how may we convey the pathos of our passage when our own passion may not be conducive to do so? To me the key is found in our preparation in the study before we stand in the pulpit. In my message “Our Ascended Lord,” extensive preparation was involved. Because it was a special message for a special occasion, I had longer to prepare than I did in my weekly sermon preparation. As I studied in the months leading up to the preaching time, the passages relative to my message actually overcame me. I sought to find the pathos as well as the logos of the passage.

If our passage is “born” in the study, it is more likely to be “born again” in the pulpit, regardless of our competing emotions.

Richard Eslinger indicates that the Word must be internalized within the preacher. Quoting Warren Stewart, he says, “when the Word is internalized by the preacher, [it] becomes a living experience first to the preacher, and then to those to whom the message is directed.”⁹ If we experience this in our study, we are more likely to express the glories of our Scripture selection as we preach, even when our own emotional state would hinder us.

If our passage is “born” in the study, it is more likely to be “born again” in the pulpit, regardless of our competing emotions. We should all desire to

experience what is said of James S. Stewart, that he would “start expounding on a subject . . . then get so carried away . . . that it began to take control of him . . . there would be an increase in emotional intensity and a crescendo of descriptive detail and lyrical expression.”¹⁰

We who preach have a glorious advantage not available to those who speak on subjects other than God’s Word. We are promised that the divine Comforter, the Holy Spirit, will aid us as we seek to accurately and passionately preach the Word He inspired to the blessing of those who hear us. David Wells says, “The preacher comes with God’s own self-disclosure; the orator came simply with skills that moved on the audience.”¹¹ We can preach our passage passionately when we are anointed by the Holy Spirit to do so. We must claim this anointing every time we stand to preach. When the Holy Spirit takes over, He will help us preach the passion of the Scripture passage and keep our competing emotions from overshadowing the divinely inspired pathos of the Word He inspired.

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