

An Idea to Enrich Your Preaching

The Christian Pulpit Heritage Sermon

I grew up in an era of great preaching by great preachers. They were often lauded as princes of the pulpit, for in those days they were almost all men. They had a presence in the pulpit. There was an electrifying energy in their delivery. Their sermons were well crafted to the extent that they were literary works of art. The service turned on its axis when they took to the pulpit. Their messages were dynamic and dealt with everyday life through the lens of scripture. They grabbed their hearers' attention with the first sentence and held it to the very end of their inspiring conclusion. They understood that preaching was the main event and they lived up to the task. Such preachers had large followings and their printed sermons were eagerly received, often published and sometimes became best sellers.

The preacher who was influential in my call to ministry was like that. His name was Paul Quillian. When my parents knew him, he was senior pastor of First Methodist Church in Houston, Texas. He married my parents and baptized me as an infant. My dad loved Paul Quillian. He would tell me that when Quillian preached, the sanctuary at First Methodist was filled to overflowing. Loudspeakers were mounted on the outside of the church so those who could not get in could still hear him preach. They even stood in the rain under their umbrellas to hear him.

Paul Quillian died not long after he baptized me. I never knew him. But his impact on my parents was so great that they named my younger brother after Paul Quillian when he was born two years after me. Those parental memories of this powerful preacher got burned into my spiritual DNA. Years later when, I was a student at Asbury Theological Seminary, one of our Methodist bishops spoke in chapel and told the story of when Paul Quillian was a young man with a promising career in business he moved to Atlanta, GA to work for a soft drink bottling company. Paul's father was concerned that his son might succumb to the challenges of living in a large metropolitan area, so he wrote to a pastor he knew in Atlanta asking him to check in with Paul every so often to see how he was doing.

During one of his visits, the pastor took Paul Quillian to lunch. He had glimpsed abilities in Paul that were better suited to a different career than he was pursuing. So, over lunch the pastor said, "Paul, when you stand at the gates of heaven and the Lord asks how you spent your life, are you going to be satisfied telling him, 'I sold red soda pop?'" That question began a process in Paul Quillian that led to his call to ministry and he became one of Methodism's greatest, most beloved preachers.

Over the years I chose about a dozen of these preachers to read and listen to, and do critical analysis of their sermon structure, exegesis, illustrations, communication techniques, and delivery styles. I learned a lot about preaching and identified certain transferrable principles that influenced and inspired my preaching. One of these was Clovis Chappel. Another was Charles L. Allen. Yet another was Bill Hinson. These three coincidentally shared something in common with Paul Quillian. They were all senior pastors at First Methodist Church in Houston. My father had heard all of them preach. I heard two of them—Charles Allen and Bill Hinson.

And there were others. Leslie Weatherhead, Peter Marshall, Lloyd Ogilvie, David Seamands, Dennis Kinlaw, and best of all, Fred Craddock. I first heard Fred Craddock at a ministers conference where he preached for two sessions and held an extended seminar on preaching. Another time he preached two sermons at the East Ohio Annual Conference in Lakeside, Ohio. These were among the finest sermons I have ever heard. One of them is my favorite sermon of all time and I make a point to listen to it at least once a year. It always touches me deeply.

While I aspired to be the kind of preacher I admired these men to be, I know I fell far short. I have longed for my congregations to be exposed to their messages. To be touched by the way they weaved the gospel and contemporary life challenges together in such a beautiful, persuasive way. Their sermons were tapestries in words and images that breathed life into the scripture and their hearers alike.

I wondered as early as my first appointment how could I share these masterpieces by master preachers with my congregation? Then an idea came to me. I decided I could preach their sermons verbatim myself. I had manuscripts of some of their messages and recordings of others. I had the content, but how could I use it with integrity? The answer came in what I called a *Christian Pulpit Heritage Sermon*. Under this rubric I brought, fully announced and disclosed to my congregation, the best of the best of the Christian pulpit. I would do this once every year or so with each sermon preceded by an introduction to the preacher and their contribution to the Christian church.

In this way I preached

The Wheat and the Tares by Clovis Chappell

The Real Thing by Leslie Weatherhead

The 23rd Psalm by Charles L. Allen

Life's Most Pressing Questions my own message heavily inspired by Bill Hinson

Trial by Fire by Peter Marshall

Confess Your Faith by Fred Craddock

Lazarus and the Rich Man by Fred Craddock

The common thread among all these preachers that made them so effective was their embrace of narrative preaching. No one could tell stories as well as Charles Allen and Fred Craddock. No one could preach the gospel more clearly or better than this group of preachers. Each time I studied their work, learned what I could about their approach to preparing the sermon, glimpsed their thought process, and mimicked the best I could the cadences of their delivery, I came away a better listener and hopefully a better preacher.

Response from my congregations to these *Christian Pulpit Heritage Sermons* was positive and appreciative. I didn't overplay my hand. One of these sermons every year or two fulfilled my goal to share them. Fully aware that many of these were preached to a particular congregation in a certain set of circumstances that did not parallel my current congregation and their circumstances, I would set the stage as needed to help the congregation get past those disconnects to hear the underlying, timeless message.

Recently, as I was doing research for a pastor friend, I came across a series of interviews with Fred Craddock discussing the craft of preaching. In one, the interviewer asked Craddock what he did in a week flooded with pastoral duties that crowded out his preparation time. Fred said that at times like that he would preach a sermon by another preacher and just explain to the congregation that it had been an impossible week and he was sharing a message by someone else. Wallah! Even Fred Craddock knew the utility of an occasional *Christian Pulpit Heritage Sermon*.

On my website www.doncummings.com is a category of resources on The Craft of Preaching. Select that menu tab to find links to published audios and manuscripts of some of our greatest preachers and communicators of the gospel.

Postscript: I once heard the story about a Methodist preacher who started preaching at his new appointment. After a while he developed a sense of unease. The people were polite enough, but things didn't seem quite right. So, he called a meeting of what was then called the Pulpit Committee to try to find out what was going on. He described his feeling of unease and asked the committee members if they could help him understand that if there was a problem, what was it? They hemmed and hawed a bit but finally got around to saying, "Well pastor, you're a likeable fellow, and you have a good delivery in the pulpit, but we can't figure out why you are preaching all of our former pastor's sermons." Their former pastor was Clovis Chappell whose books of sermons were quite popular, widely read, and apparently frequently preached by other preachers.

What this pastor did was dreaded plagiarism. He never gave credit to his source. We can avoid this worst of all preacher sins when we give full credit to the author whose work we preach. Their contributions are so dynamic they need to be preserved and shared with the church in all ages. We do them honor, and bless our congregations, when we present them as part of our rich Christian Pulpit Heritage of the best of the best sermons.