

Prophetic Preaching for the Faithful Life

Seungyoun Jeong
Boston University, Boston, MA

Note: This article is a part of one entitled “Preaching and the Church’s Public Life in Korean Society: Toward Prophetic Preaching as the Call for the Church’s Faithful Practice.” The full paper begins with my hypothesis that one significant reason for the Korean church’s current problems in the public space is the focus of Korean sermons on personal blessings and perspectives which lack the present embodiment of the Word in our lives, on pre-millennial eschatology that tends to ignore social concern and involvement, and on numerical church growth. Therefore, throughout the paper, I argue on three points as follows. First, the theology in Korean sermons must formulate a revised eschatology which stresses on today’s salvation. Second, Korean preaching must recognize individuals as integral parts of society and reflect their personal faith and relationship with God in the context of the community by understanding that their suffering is not merely in relation to personal faith but also the result of structural socio-cultural problems. Third, the Korean sermon must be free from numerical growth so that it seeks solidarity for the world’s salvation, with future-oriented communal and holistic blessings, and a prophetic vision of a better society based on God’s intention. Hence, in the original complete paper, I offer and investigate prophetic preaching that encourages the church toward more faithful practices and response to social issues shaped by the church’s responsibility and its eschatological engagement in the divine work for the Korean church. And the paper entitled “Prophetic Preaching for the Faithful Life” as a portion of the original is my homiletical investigation on prophetic preaching. Because of the space limit, I will summarize each chapter.

Introduction

This paper is to explore how prophetic preaching can serve the reconstruction of Christians’ faithful living in relation to a practical theology that is deeply concerned with human being’s concrete participation in the redemptive work of God in a specific context.

Definition of Prophetic preaching

My definition of prophetic preaching is that it is a proclamation of an alternative reality (interpreting the biblical narrative) containing the divine redemptive intention through theological reflection on the contemporary social situation (criticism) and prophetic witness to God’s activity (discernment) for Christians’ faithful participation (practice). In short, prophetic narrative sermons will be formulated with interpretation of the biblical narrative, critical inquiry into the current situation, discernment of the divine at work based in a new congregational story, and animated by Christians’ faithful participation.

The Prophetic Preacher as The Prophet

First, the prophet is one who sympathizes with the divine pathos, the suffering of God over the life of the covenant people and the creation as a whole.¹ Hence, prophetic preaching is not only always *against* something but also *for* something for the sake of God’s people who are suffering

¹ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 136.

injustice, war, poverty, prejudice, and oppression.²

Second, regarding the prophet's function of encouraging the faith community toward the future, Mary Donovan Turner notes Miriam's prophetic role in the Israelite community. According to Turner, Miriam's performance of dancing and singing includes proclamation of God's mighty deeds (their communal past experience about God's actions for exile) recounting the providential hand of the divine at work in human history.³ Therefore, at the beginning of the exodus story Miriam's performance is an eschatological statement which ushers in God's redemptive works against the oppressive situation, forces the Israelites to face and move toward the unknown future by encouraging the people to trust in the work of the divine for the Israelite's ultimate deliverance.⁴ In this sense, such prophetic performance in the Christian pulpit can invigorate congregations to participate in the future divine work in light of the fulfillment of the ultimate eschatological purpose of history.

Third, considering the prophet's integration between the words and deeds, Mary Catherine Hilker asserts that prophetic preaching should be spoken and embodied as God's future reign today by lifting up the good example of the prophet, Jesus.⁵ Thus, we can realize that prophetic preaching must not only be the spoken word of God's compassion but also its embodiment for the sake of Christians as well as all people in general.

Prophetic Preaching and Future Action

In this section, I will explore prophetic preaching's potentiality for future action and its distinctiveness.

First, prophetic action is a response to one or more of these three things; undeserved human suffering, a new reality, and God's grace. Since prophetic preaching includes unfair human sufferings, prophetic preaching can empower Christians to respond to undeserved human suffering under oppressive systems by breaking the church's silence surrounding rape, incest, racism, unjust, and woman battering.⁶ After sharing the new reality (based on God's intention) that has broken into the world, the preacher turns to particular practices as the means for living into this new reality of new hope in the midst of despair.⁷ Therefore, naming destructive situations within the life of the church will bring about the church's life-giving action.

Second, actions based on prophetic preaching are not from moral command but hope-filled vision. They are not burdensome but redemptive – and possibly even exciting.⁸

Third, within God's grand story, actions mean living toward the vision of God's new reality. The concept of participation in God's grand story fits in with canonical narrative theology. That is, prophetic preaching seeks to ensure the Christian community remains faithful to the narrative of the original God-given plot of the gospel and to practice faithfully as the narrative unfolds.⁹ Therefore, my point is that canonical narrative's embodiment as prophetic actions must be enacted not only in the church's building but also in the world through Christians' engagement (action) in the world's stories which prompt them to use prophetic voices.

² John McClure, *Preaching Words: 114 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 117.

³ Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit eds., *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 95.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mary Catherine Hilker, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2006), 63.

⁶ Christine M. Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 6.

⁷ Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: an Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 151.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 5.

Preparation of the Sermon

This section will discuss the means of preparation of prophetic sermons; especially Elaine Graham's method of "transforming practice as disclosing God and a model of transcendence" and Paul Tillich's "the critical correlational method."

Before inquiry about specific practical theological methods, the overall preparation process of the sermon will be like this: (1) exploration of situation and specific issues with the help of other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and politics as well, (2) theological reflection upon congregational new experience (witness/story) about the divine nature and the process of the (transforming) participation in the divine work, (3) theological exploration and reflection with the biblical narrative, and (4) discerning the truth and suggesting new life (revised practice), (5) writing the sermon in ways that evoke new possibilities and actions.¹⁰

First, prophetic preachers engage in a dialogue with other disciplines to understand specific issues and situations. As a matter of fact, prophetic preaching starts with human beings' existential problems (human suffering) in particular contexts. So, prophetic preachers need to attend very carefully to the analysis of social reality.¹¹ However, in the mutual critical conversation, theology has the logical priority compared to other disciplines for the sake of the church's radical future practices.

Second, prophetic preachers should carefully take into account the congregation's daily stories about their experiences (witness) of the divine presence. In fact, in terms of listening to the lived experience of faith, such new stories of the congregation will be helpful for glimpsing the divine intention. According to Elaine Graham, transforming practice will disclose new understandings of God.¹² Moreover, this knowledge can force the church to serve as a medium of God's presence to the world.¹³ Thus, the transforming practice of a congregation as a medium of God can allow the congregation to embody alterity (Otherness).¹⁴ In this sense, prophetic preaching can contain fresh prophetic voices thanks to the congregation's new witness stories and spiritual experiences of embodying the Other in the course of transformative actions.

Next, Paul Tillich's mutual correlational methods provide a method by which prophetic preachers interpret the various social problems and discern the congregation's new witness about discovered divine activity based on the biblical narrative. Tillich's correlational methods give answers about social problems and our existential questions so as to realize Christian theology (the Christian norms) within not only the church but also society.¹⁵ This is because Tillich's theological approach is both ontological and existential. And, Tillich's method of correlation is grounded in increased affinity between the divine and the human realm, or Being-itself (God) and our participation in this Being. Therefore, Tillich's method is possible to reach theological understanding only through an active engagement with the world whereby one asks questions of the reality which one inhabits and experience.¹⁶ For Tillich the interpretation of human questions or their experience of the Ultimate Reality (God), depend upon the Bible as the primary source among three; the Bible, church history, and the history of religion and culture. Therefore, if preachers use Tillich's correlational method, preachers can find the truth and answers from the biblical narrative.

So, for Tillich, the Bible provides preachers who are discerning contemporary revelatory

¹⁰ Ibid., 80-81.

¹¹ McClure, 118.

¹² Osmer, 155.

¹³ Ibid., 160.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Pastoral Theology and Public Theology: Development in the U.S.," in Graham and Rowlands, eds., *Pathways to the Public Square: Practical Theology in an Age of Pluralism* (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2005), 100.

¹⁶ Stephen Bulter Murray, "Socially Relevant Theology and the Courage to Be: The Influence of Paul Tillich on the Womanist Theology of Delores S. Willimans," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 58 no. 3-4 (2004), 97

experience with a view to how God has been at work through human history. Thus, in this way, we can validate the Christian witness to new knowledge of the divine through the biblical narrative. In short, in preparation for the sermon, Tillich's mutual correlational method will potentially help preachers make their congregation act in accordance with the biblical narrative in the world after hearing the answers to their existential problems from their revelatory experience.

Prophetic Preaching as Practical Theology

Based on John Swinton and Harriet Mowat's definition of practical theology, I think that prophetic preaching can carry out the enterprise of practical theology in these four dimensions: (1) As practical theology seeks the knowledge of God, prophetic preaching also seeks for the knowledge of God for more faithful participation (living) in the divine redemptive activity for the world. (2) As practical theology aims to enable faithful living and authentic Christian practice, prophetic preachers make implicitly or explicitly actions for the particular context.¹⁷ (3) As practical theology does reflection within the human experience, prophetic preaching also is concerned with our living place as an essential locus for the work of the New Being (God) in which emerges not only the divine redemptive activity but also human responses to the divine activity.¹⁸ (4) As practical theological reflection embraces the practices of the world, prophetic preaching which contains an alternative reality (a new world) is for not only the church but also the world.

In this respect, prophetic preaching can carry out the undertaking of practical theology in light of preaching toward the world, seeking authentic Christian living in accordance with the divine redemptive purpose, theological reflection upon the society, and participating in the ongoing narrative of God.

¹⁷ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Know Press, 2010), 99.

¹⁸ Swinton and Mowat, 7-8.