

Malaysian Association of Theological Schools Journal

2nd Issue

2008

Pages 67-73

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Tie King Tai

Methodist Theological School

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INTRODUCTION

Many preachers (including this writer) were taught to use the first personal pronoun (“we”) or third personal pronoun (“they”) instead of the second person (“you”) in preaching. The use of “you” was uncommon in the homiletics classes that this writer had attended or taught. This usage is also rare as it can be shown in a literature survey on the topic of homiletics. This paper attempts to demonstrate the need for using the “you” in preaching.

USE “YOU” THROUGHOUT THE SERMON

Adams recommends the usage of the second personal pronoun “you” throughout the sermon from introduction to conclusion. His excellent explanation is given here:

A minister stands before God’s people neither as an objective observer nor in his own right, but as a “man from God” (2 Tim. 3:17). He is a keryx (the Greek word for “herald”)...The herald is a person with authority, one commissioned to deliver messages from God. In the pulpit, therefore, he identifies, not

¹Major parts of this paper are drawn from this writer’s dissertation: Tie King Tai, *Essential Elements of Relevant Application in Preaching* (Unpublished Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001).

with the recipients of God's Word, but with God; he also identifies with the writers of biblical books and with Jesus and the apostles whenever they speak in various preaching portions. Identify with the right person and you will know how you ought to preach. Then, only then, will you be in a proper relationship to God and your congregation...The dominant pronoun in his preaching is you...The prevailing tenses he uses are the present and the future. The herald preaches the Bible, not as a book describing what God did or said in time past, but as God's present Word to the people of God gathered before him.²

Adams also gives an excellent illustration on using the second personal pronoun instead of the first person pronoun:

You are driving down the street and run a red light. A police car comes out of nowhere and tails you with light flashing. You pull over. The officer gets out of his car, comes to your window, and says, "We went through a red light, didn't we? Let's have a look at our licenses. I will write us a ticket, and we will have to pay a fine or go to jail."

"Ridiculous!" you say.

Of course. But no more ridiculous than some preachers sound. The policeman comes with authority. He says, "You went through a red light. Let me see your license, etc." He uses the second person "you" throughout the unpleasant experience...Now, tell me, why should you accept the authority of God vested in the state and in the police officer as its agent and not accept the authority of God's Word vested in His church and in its agent, the preacher?³

²Jay E. Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990), p. 27.

³Adams, *Truth*, pp. 30-31.

Language is the preacher's primary tool, and he should be thoroughly skilled in its strengths and subtleties. A carelessly or wrongly selected word may confuse or mislead a congregation.⁴ The language in preaching is contemporary, everyday speech, vivid, concrete, exploding with active verbs, simple, and straightforward. This language is to be dominated by the second person ("you")⁵ rather than the third ("they")⁶ or even the first ("we").

⁴ J. Stewart Miller, "Effective Preaching: A Cluster of Conditions", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36.2 (1983): 229-241, here p. 239.

⁵ This writer recommends more research to be done on the usage of "you" in preaching. In the humble opinion of this writer, this area of concern in preaching needs to be researched and addressed more for the following reasons:

Firstly, the older people in the congregation may resent the usage of too many "you's" in preaching, especially when the sermon is preached by younger or lady pastors. During one of the classes on Homiletics, in which this writer was teaching, four church members were invited to share their experiences of listening to sermons so that the students might get a feel of what members thought about preaching. The two older members (45-60 years old) voiced out their resentment towards the usage of "you" in preaching, while the other two younger members (late 20's and early 30's) expressed an opposite sentiment. That is, the younger ones liked the straightforward style of using "you."

Maybe a seminar on "The Art of Listening to Sermons" should be conducted in churches in order that church members would understand and realize the authority vested in the pulpits and that they would be more submissive to the Word of God preached to them. Or perhaps another researcher should write a dissertation on "Essential Elements of Relevant Application in Listening to Sermons" after this researcher's dissertation on "Essential Elements of Relevant Application in Preaching."

Secondly, in the Doctor of Ministry project that this writer conducted, the older and lady pastors used less of "you" even after the teaching seminar (compared with the younger and male pastors). Two of them even decreased the number of times they used "you" after the seminar! A research could be done to uncover the reasons behind.

Thirdly, Adams' emphasis on using "you" throughout the sermons should be re-examined and re-emphasized (if found necessary) in order that preachers might exercise the authority vested in them appropriately, powerfully, yet lovingly (Tie, *Essential Elements*, pp. 163-66).

⁶ Adams, *Truth*, p. 107.

Adams' emphasis is biblical. Here are some biblical examples of sermons whereby the preachers used the second person pronoun in the majority. For example, in Matthew 5:12-26 (NIV) of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used at least ten second-person "you" compared to thirteen first-person and third-person pronouns. In Acts 3:12-26 (NIV), Peter used at least twenty second-person pronouns compared to forty-nine first plus third persons.

Robinson also states that "the personal pronoun 'you' gives both minister and audience a sense of oneness. While 'you' can be effective, at other times the preacher will say 'we' because he means 'you and I.'"⁷

He explains that "sermons use direct address. While a writer may say, 'In their conversations, Christians must be careful of how they speak about others,' a preacher will most likely say, 'You must be careful of how you talk about others.'"⁸

In a more recent book, Robinson emphasizes that after the explanation of the text, "it's appropriate for the preacher to leave behind 'we' in favor of 'you.' No longer is the preacher representing the people to God; he is representing God to the people...it's you – not you plural but you singular – you personally who must decide what you will do with the truth you've heard. For the preacher to say 'you' at that point isn't arrogant; he's standing apart from the congregation. He's simply challenging each listener to make personal application."⁹

⁷ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1980 & 2001), pp. 184, 192-3.

⁸ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, p. 192.

⁹ Haddon W. Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Eds.), *The Art & Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), p. 299.

A WORD OF CAUTION

However, a preacher needs to be careful in using the second person pronoun by taking note of at least three things:

Firstly, he must be sure that he is not "lording it over the flock."¹⁰ Secondly, he should use examples and illustrations from his own life in which he "goofed," failed, or were the butt of some jokes so that the congregation will recognize clearly how he makes a distinction between him as a person and him as a preacher. Thirdly, he needs to emphasize directly, at times, that he is a herald from God by saying: "Don't think I have invented this stupendous truth out of the whole cloth. This is God's gracious promise!" Or, in regard to rebuke: "Please listen carefully to what God says. He's the One who says this, not I!"¹¹

When the preacher, as a herald, uses "you," he does not want to abuse or misuse it. Especially in an Eastern culture context such as that of the Chinese or Iban, the preacher needs to use it discreetly, humbly, and wisely.¹² Nevertheless, he needs to make good use of it in order to bring across the message directly, personally, and powerfully to the listeners. Also, he needs to take note that the word "you" in English can be singular or plural. However, it is different in Chinese; there are two different Chinese characters for the word "you". The Chinese character

¹⁰ The preacher's relationship with his or her congregation also decides the effectiveness of using "you" in preaching. This writer knows of a lady pastor whose relationship with her church leaders and members is so good that they actually look forward to her scolding or rebuking by using "you." And they serve happily and willingly with her.

¹¹ Adams, *Truth*, pp. 29-30.

¹² It would be most effective to use "you" affirmatively or positively. In doing so, the preacher commends the congregation in their good points such as "you are faithful in your ministry" or "you are most generous in your giving" or "you are most loving in taking care of the poor and hungry" etc.

in singular is “ni.” The plural is “ni men.”¹³ Using the singular “ni” is preferable because, again, it is more direct, personal, and powerful.¹⁴ “Ni” is also preferable because “ni men” sounds judgmental and awkward to the ears of the audience as it covers all who are listening but who might not need that part of the message.

CONCLUSION

Even though many preachers were commonly taught to use “we” or “they” in preaching, this paper has attempted to demonstrate the need to use “you” in preaching so that the preachers may exercise wisely and lovingly the authority that God has given to them in preaching the Word powerfully and personally.

¹³ On July 27, 2007, after this writer presented this paper to the faculty (consisting of both Chinese and Iban lecturers) of Methodist Theological School, the Iban lecturers explained that different pronouns are also being used in Iban, namely “nuan” for the singular “you” and “kita” for the plural “you all.” “Kitai” is “we.”

¹⁴ As this writer was pondering over the usage of this pronoun during the dissertation project, a lady pastor cum qualified trainer of Children Evangelism Fellowship from Taiwan came to Sibul, Malaysia to train the local pastors in writing Sunday School curriculum materials for children. She also emphasized the use of “you” in singular (“ni”) when they wrote the materials and when the Sunday School teachers taught the children. By using “we” or “you” in plural, the children might not be able to receive the gospel message and other messages of God personally. But by using “you” in singular, the children would realize that the materials or the teachers were talking to them directly and personally. Therefore they would apply the truth in their lives personally.

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