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WHAT DO YOU MEAN "TRUTH THROUGH PERSONALITY"? THE PHILLIPS BROOKS DEFINITION OF PREACHING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Applying historical-grammatical hermeneutics to the Brooks definition of preaching as *truth through personality* helps us hear Brooks say that the sum of all *truth* is Christ. His truth does not stand in indifference to his person as some theologians insisted. By *personality* Brooks stressed not only the divine person of Christ but also the preacher” character. The contemporary usage of both words, the eight lectures in context, and the colorful history of the 1870” tell the story.

Introduction

Phillips Brooks is best known in homiletics for the definition of preaching in his Lyman Beecher Lectures of 1877. It is arguably the most famous definition of preaching. The opening lecture entitled “The Two Elements in Preaching,” comes to the point.

What then, is preaching of which we are to speak? It is not hard to find a definition. Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. Neither of these can it spare and still be preaching (Brooks, 1877, 5).

Preachers (and especially those who train them) might profitably explore these words in historical context. Both nouns, *truth* and *personality*, are colored by their usage in 1877 when he delivered the lectures. The historical context of the lectures also informs his meaning. Brooks lived and served mainly in Boston during a theological maelstrom around the person of Christ. There is also a long history to the question of how the messenger” character impacts his message.

The Terms *Truth* and *Personality*

Truth, as Brooks used the term in his definition and in his own preaching had two meanings. The more abstract usage is sometimes evident, and sometimes the reference is to Jesus personally as the Truth. In *The Influence of Jesus*, Brooks melded both meanings.

The message entrusted to the Son of God when he came to be the Savior of mankind was not only something which He knew and taught; it was something which He was The

idea and the person are so mingled that we cannot separate them. He is the truth, and whoever receives Him becomes the son of God (Brooks, *Influence of Jesus* quoted in Alexander, 1900, 2:216).

The term *personality* is even more crucial to understanding Brooks. In the first lecture he admitted that “the principle of personality . . . involves the individuality of every preacher Every preacher should utter the truth in his own way” (Brooks, 1877, 23). That is foundational, but before he left the introductory lecture Brooks stressed the need for preachers “to become more pure and godly” and to “preach as honestly, as intellectually, and as spiritually as we can” (Brooks, 1877, 33-35).

The emphasis on “the preacher” personal character” continued in the second lecture entitled “The Preacher Himself.” What sort of person must the preacher be? Brooks believed there was “far too little discrimination in the selection of men who are to preach.” Of five necessary qualities for preachers, the first listed is “personal piety, a deep possession in one” own soul of the faith and hope and resolution which he is to offer to his fellow men for their new life.” Turning to several “elements of personal power” which will make a preacher successful, Brooks began with the one of “upreme importance,” and again it is the matter “of character, of personal uprightness and purity” (Brooks, 1877, 35-49).

This is a theme to which Brooks returned again and again in the series of lectures. He laid his foundation in the conviction that the personality of Christ validated his words and deeds. He built the superstructure with the insistence that the personal character of the preacher is crucial to his work as a Christian minister.

Background to the Issue of the Personal Character of the Minister

Four centuries before Christ, Aristotle” *Rhetoric* spoke of the importance of *ethos* (the character of the speaker) along with *logos* (the content of the speech) and *pathos* (the feeling or passion ignited by a speech). The most indispensable of these three modes of persuasion, said Aristotle, is not argument for the intellect nor appeal to the emotions but the assurance of the speaker” character.” We believe good men more fully and more readily than others.” (Cf. Larsen, 1989, 132-133 and Lowthian, 2003, 1). Rhetoricians following him agreed including Cicero in the first century B.C. and Quintilian in the first century A.D. Quintilian adopted Cato” definition of the orator as a good man skilled in speaking (Baxter, 1947, 288f).

The Donatists of the early fourth century raised the question whether the validity of the sacrament depended on the worthiness of the minister who administered them. Strict Donatists believed that a personally unworthy bishop was unable to administer baptism with any saving grace. Augustine disagreed. “To my mind it is abundantly clear that in the matter of baptism we have to consider not who he is that gives it but what it is he gives” (Augustine, *De baptismo*, iv. 16, quoted in Bettenson, 1943, 110). Augustine did believe that while a morally weak man might compose a doctrinally sound sermon, a good man would recite the same sermon to better effect.

Other Church Fathers noted that a preacher might do more harm with his daily deportment than any good he might do with his Sunday sermon. The prevailing opinion of the Roman Catholic Church through the Middle Ages was that the power given in apostolic succession was sufficient to make the sacraments valid.

During the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, Reformation theology emphasized the power inherent in the Word rather than in the messenger. After the Reformation, the debate focused on the question of whether the preacher must be personally born of the Spirit in order for his proclamation to be effective. A weakness of the church in the eighteenth century until the Evangelical Awakening was the assumption that character had little connection to the work of the Christian preacher (cf. Baker, 1959, 39ff and Allen, 1900, 2:180). Solomon Stoddard, for example, defended the halfway covenant of 1662 that allowed children to be baptized into the church if only one of the parents were in the faith. In addition, he thought it not absolutely necessary that pastors should be born again. His grandson, Jonathan Edwards, rejected both concessions.

Phillips Brooks, an Episcopalian, ascribed to the *Thirty Nine Articles of Religion* dating to 1517 and governing Anglicans and Episcopalians of his time. Article XXVI speaks of the *unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the [Word and] Sacraments*.

Although in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good, and sometimes the evil have chief authority in the Ministration of the Word and Sacraments; yet forasmuch as they do not the same in their own name, but in Christ", and do minister by his commission and authority, we may use their Ministry both in hearing the Word of God and in receiving the Sacraments. Neither is the effect of Christ" ordinance taken away by their wickedness, nor the grace of God" gifts diminished from such as by faith, and rightly, do receive the Sacraments ministered unto them; which be effectual because of Christ" institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men.

A final paragraph of the article calls for discipline, nevertheless. Evil ministers "being found guilty by just judgment [must] be deposed" (Grudem, 1994, pp.1175-1176).

The Boston Background of the Brooks Lectures

Is it possible for us to determine what was in the mind of the lecturer and those who first heard him? It should be helpful to consider burning theological issues of the times. We mention a few movers and shakers in the nineteenth century Boston religious scene.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was born in Boston and ordained a Unitarian minister at Second Church, Boston, six years before Phillips Brooks was born. After less than three years in the parish ministry, he abandoned that career and moved on to become a popular philosopher, essayist and orator. In his essays and in his journals for the 1830" and 1840" he spelled out his disdain for the Unitarian infatuation with personality "particularly the personality of Jesus. He thought it led people to clamor after personal immortality though Jesus never uttered "one syllable about the naked immortality of the soul." The Massachusetts Unitarians, says historian Richard W. Fox, "put all their chips on Christ" personality against the Trinitarian orthodoxy . . . Giving Jesus a perfect personality was their way of keeping him

quasi-divine as they demoted him from the Godhead" (Fox, 2004, 195). More than the traditional Unitarians, Emerson divested Jesus of all divinity in the fashion of Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin and Tom Paine before him. Emerson's Journal of 1835 described Jesus as the wondrously gifted individual who grasped that "God must be sought within, not without" (Fox, 2004, 198).

Emerson's most enduring contribution may be the dubious legacy of "self-reliance." He considered the culture of his day blinded by the personalized Christ. In one agitated journal entry in 1840, he said, "It might become my duty to spit in the face of Christ as a sacred duty to the Soul." He thought a thoroughly human Jesus would appreciate the gesture.

A devotee of Emerson and another renegade Unitarian minister in Boston was **Theodore Parker (1810-1860)**. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, he was so liberal that even the Unitarians rejected him. His lectures in 1842 enraged the Boston clergy and city leaders as well. He was, nevertheless, an immensely popular preacher with the common man. They built him a great auditorium and installed him there as minister of Twenty-eighth Congregational Society. He preached on social issues such as poverty, war, slavery, crime and punishment. Parker insisted that the truth of Jesus stood in isolation or indifference to his person. The doctrines of Christianity were like axioms of geometry "true no matter who stated them. Parker said,

If it could be proved that the gospels were the fabrication of designing and artful men, that Jesus of Nazareth had never lived, still Christianity would stand firm and fear no evil. None of the doctrines of that religion would fall to the ground, for, if true, they stand by themselves (Fox, 2004, 299).

Phillips Brooks (1835-1893), to the contrary, identified the great defect of the age in which he lived as its tendency to seek after abstract truth divested of personal relations. In a sermon on John 14:6 "I am the way and the truth and the life," Brooks insisted that the sum of all truth is the person of Christ (Allen, 1900, 2:205; see also Brooks, 1877, 7).

Brooks was born in Boston. His mother was a Congregationalist with strong evangelical beliefs. After graduating from Harvard, Brooks taught in Boston Latin School a rather unsatisfying two years and then went to Virginia for divinity school. On graduation in 1859, he was ordained rector in Philadelphia. He served two years in that charge and about eight years in another also in Philadelphia, before moving back to Boston in 1869 as rector of Trinity Church. He continued in Boston the rest of his life. Late in his ministry, Brooks abandoned the Evangelicalism of his youth for broad-church Liberalism. In 1887 he wrote to Dr. Herman Dyer, saying, "I am more and more sure that the dogmatic theology in which I was brought up was wrong" (Steer, 1999, pp. 14, 169). Brooks became bishop of Massachusetts in 1891 less than two years before his death at age 57.

We have noted that the religious climate of Boston in the nineteenth century was predominantly Unitarian. They were not at all of one heart and voice in their concept of Jesus, however. It is notable that they disagreed much on *truth* and on *personality* as it related to Jesus.

Another important voice in mid-nineteenth century Boston was **Borden Parker Bowne (1847-1910)**. He became head of the philosophy department at Boston University (then called Boston

College) in 1876. This was a few months before Brooks delivered his Yale Lectures. Later dean of the graduate school, Bowne systematically developed a type of theism called *Personalism*. He stressed the reality and freedom of the self and insisted on the central importance of personality. Kenneth Scott Latourette charitably characterized this pioneer of liberal Protestantism as “near to the conservative position in his estimate of Christ” (Latourette, 1953, p.1263). Bowne was charged with teaching heresy at Boston University , a Methodist school.

Personalism later became a term applied somewhat loosely to any philosophy in which persons are regarded as the highest form of reality and, therefore, as possessing intrinsic value. It is now a noun with many adjectives: atheistic personalism, theistic personalism, pantheistic personalism, humanistic personalism among others (cf. Harvey, 1964, 183-164). Brooks delivered an oration at Boston University in 1865, a decade before Bowne came to that school fresh from graduate studies in Germany . Though Brooks and Bowne were likely to have known each other in Boston of the 1870” , there is no discernable connection between the philosopher and the preacher nor between their separate uses of the term *personality*. The point to note here is that *personality* was an important theological concept in nineteenth century Boston , and not everyone used the term with the same meaning.

The most important figure by far in the historical context of the Brooks lectures is **Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)**, who delivered the lectures in 1872, 1873, and 1874. These were the first three years of the lectureship named in honor of his father, Lyman Beecher. After the fourth and fifth years by John Hall, 1875, and William M. Taylor, 1876, Phillips Brooks delivered his *Lectures on Preaching*, 1877. Though Brooks considered Beecher “the greatest preacher Protestantism ever produced” (Larsen, 1998, 530), there was nevertheless, during all three years of the Beecher lectures and continuing until after the Brooks lectures a simmering scandal. It exploded into public view in 1874. Then came the very public criminal trial of Beecher in the first six months of 1875. That the scandal was on the minds of those who heard the Brooks lectures in early 1877 seems beyond reasonable doubt.

What was the Beecher scandal? Henry Ward Beecher developed a strong friendship with Theodore Tilton, a writer and editor of a popular religious journal called the *Independent*. Tilton and his wife Elizabeth were twenty-two years younger than Beecher . They both grew up in his Plymouth congregation and were united by Beecher in holy matrimony. Tilton began a series of lecture tours in 1866 that kept him away from Brooklyn three or four months every year. Though Beecher was not known for making pastoral calls, he began calling on Mrs. Tilton every week, reading bedtime stories to the children and putting them to bed. Elizabeth described his visits in letters to her husband, obviously flattered by the attention of this “great man.”

Historian Altina L. Waller concluded that the pastor “probably succeeded in seducing Elizabeth “ on October 10, 1868 . On July 3, 1870 , Elizabeth confessed to her husband. He at first agreed to keep her secret and help to heal her “wounded spirit.” In time, it seems his own wounded spirit led him to make the matter known to others. Beecher and a trusted lay leader visited Mrs. Tilton and persuaded her to write a letter retracting her confession. Beecher dictated the letter as she wrote. Beecher mortgaged his home to start a newspaper for his friend Tilton to edit. *The Golden Age* began publication in January 1871. (Mark Twain” novel two years later would be titled *The Gilded Age*.) For several years a policy of containment seemed to keep the rumors from the larger public.

Then into this soap opera entered one Victoria Woodhull, a women" rights activist soon to be better known for her advocacy of Free Love. In 1871 two of Beecher " sisters, Catherine and Harriet, angered Woodhull by public attacks on her. In the fall of the same year, Theodore Tilton in preparation to write her biography, spent several days a week with her for an extended period. During this time Woodhull learned of the Beecher-Tilton affair mainly from Theodore himself. Woodhull wrote an expose in her weekly magazine, chiding the great pastor of Plymouth church more for hypocrisy than for adultery. She said he believed and practiced Free Love but was unwilling to preach it openly or otherwise take his stand publicly. The scandal first appeared in the newspapers the last week of October 1872 (Waller, 1982, x, 135).

By July 1874, public outcry made a policy of silence impossible. Beecher appointed a Church Investigation Committee. They gathered testimony, which the newspapers published verbatim. "A fascinated public hung on every word" (Waller, 1982, 16). During "candal summer" 1874, "Brooklynites read and talked of little else than the guilt or innocence of Henry Ward Beecher" (Waller, 1982, 91). Elizabeth Tilton left her husband and the next day testified before the committee of her unhappy marriage. She denied any adultery. Theodore Tilton introduced letters from Beecher along with a great stack of other documents he considered irrefutable evidence of their guilt. The Church Investigating Committee decided in favor of their illustrious pastor, however, and removed Theodore Tilton from membership by a vote of 210 yeas to 13 nays.

It was not over yet, however. Tilton filed criminal charges against Beecher . This trial, called "the greatest national spectacle of the 1870"," lasted through the first six months of 1875 and ended with a hung-jury acquittal. A detailed account of the scandal published at the time rejoiced in Beecher " "triumphal vindication" (Marshall, 1874, 13). In 1876 a Congregational Council of Churches conducted their own investigation ending with total support of the accused. *The Herald* summarized their decision in these words: "o far as we have been able to make it out the clergy and lay delegates mean to say to Mr. Beecher by that verdict, "You have done nothing that requires censure and you must not do it again." (Marshall, 1874, 40). Whether or not Beecher was indeed guilty is beside the point of this paper; we may give him the benefit of the doubt. More to the point is that for more than four years, 1873-76, "awareness of the scandal dominated the national consciousness" (Waller, 1982, x). "carcelly a man or woman in America would not have an opinion about the pastor" innocence or guilt" (Shaplan, 1954, 4). This is the historical setting for the Brooks lectures of early 1877.

Truth Through Personality as a Vital Theme of Brooks

Did Brooks intend his lectures as a commentary on these current events? We may be sure that he *did not*. Phillips Brooks was too much the gentleman to even insinuate the scandal involving Beecher in Brooklyn . It is never mentioned. When Brooks spoke of the personal character of the preacher, however, it would be nearly impossible for his hearers *not* to think of the Beecher scandal. And it would be most unlikely for Brooks not to realize this.

What is more certain is that the theme *truth through personality* was an important theme to Brooks at least fifteen years before his Yale lectures. In 1862 Brooks gave an address before the Evangelical Education Society on this theme. He stressed that training for ministry meant the development of personal power as an agency for moral regeneration, bringing the power of

God to bear directly on human souls. In 1865 he delivered the Phi Beta Kappa Oration at Brown University in Boston on "The Personality of the Scholar." In this address he said, "All which the minister or scholar knows or loves must go out with him into all his life." He returned to the theme again in 1870 in a dedication address at Bradford Academy and again in 1874 at Andover Theological Seminary during the height of the Beecher scandal. This was an emphasis that Brooks passionately and eloquently urged on his fellow ministers for years leading up to his Yale Lectures of 1877 (Allen, 1900, 2:179).

It was a theme that continued as central to his theology. In 1882, five years after his lectures, while on a one-year world tour, Brooks wrote his own summary of "personal convictions about religious truth" which had been gradually taking shape in his mind. Eleven articles of faith flowed one to the next in this order: God, Revelation, Christ, Prayer, Atonement, The Bible, Moral Life, *Personality*, the Church, Death, Eternity (Allen, 1900, 2:346-356, emphasis added).

In Article 8 *Personality*, Brooks emphasized one word, *character*.

Christ" whole conception of life is Personal. Every man is a true and distinct will and nature. There is no shadow of Pantheism or Fate in his teaching. It is the union of this clear sense of personality with the full declaration of God" all-pervading life which makes the greatest wonder and power of His life and doctrine. It is put forth in His teaching of the Father and the Son. Here is the strong irreconcilable issue of Christianity and Buddhism.

The Personality of Christianity is involved in the fact of its being a moral religion, and not a system of ideas or condition of feeling. It is a moral life, in responsibility and duty, in personal attainment of character and personal suffering for sin, that personality becomes clear.

We want to be very clear, in speaking of Christianity, about the real meaning of salvation. Only when it means the release from sin and the attainment to holy personal *character* [emphasis his] does it keep the essential peculiarity of Christ" teaching which is personality (Allen, 1900, 2:353).

Conclusion

We set out to explicate the definition of preaching offered by Phillips Brooks in the light of its historical context. We have attempted to make the case that Brooks fully intended to stress by *personality* not just the preacher" individuality or his public image such as an actor might portray on the stage or a politician might project to his public. Indeed, Brooks meant to emphasize the personal integrity and moral character essential for the work of the minister. It is a message preachers need to hear today, and those who train preachers must see that they learn it.

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