BOOKS I HAVE READ: EXPOSITORY PREACHING IN AFRICA

Posted on August 13, 2021 by Eddie

If you are training pastors or preachers in Africa; you have to read this.
Category: Observations

Back in the days when we were translating the New Testament into Kouya, we spent a lot of time studying and analysing what is called discourse. That is the way in which speakers of the language construct longer texts of different genres. Stories, historical narratives, arguments, prayers and so on all have their own distinctive features. A simple example from English would be the little phrase "once upon a time" which has very little meaning at the word level, but it essentially means that everything which follows is not true. You would not put the words "once upon a time" at the start of a narrative in the Gospels. Another example involves how often the main person in a narrative is referred to. In some languages, the central character is always referred to by name because they are the central character. However, other languages only refer to the central character by name at the start of the narrative and then use pronouns, because the central character is obvious and doesn't need to be pointed out every time. In English, we tend to use the central character's name at the start of each paragraph and then use pronouns after that. The thing is, if you get these things wrong, you could easily reduce Jesus role to that of a bystander in the Gospels. Translation isn't just about getting the "words" right, you also have to construct the whole text in a way that makes sense in the language.

The same goes for preaching. Different languages and cultures have different ways of organising and explaining information. You cannot simply take a model which works in one part of the world and apply it elsewhere. This is where Expository Preaching in Africa: Engaging Orality for Effective Proclamation by Ezekiel A. Ajibade comes in.

Published by Hippo Books, the paperback is 248 pages long and will set you back around Â£15, while the Kindle version is about half of that. The book is a serious academic work with ample references to a wider literature. That being said, it is not a difficult read.

The book focuses on a simple question:

> *If expository preaching is concerned with communicating Godâ€™s word with due consideration of its historical, grammatical, and literary essence, how can it be sold to a continent with a relatively low level of literacy, and to a large number of preachers who are also in this category?*

The book divides into three broad themes; the nature of expository preaching, the nature of orality and a final one which draws these two together including a couple of illustrative sermons.

Ajibade insists that expository preaching involves a particular approach to the Biblical text, rather than a specific model of sermon structure. A three point sermon may or may not be expository, depending on how the preacher uses the text.

> *"The goal is not to make listeners more educated but more Christ like.â€*

Referring to a wide range of literature and with a good deal of theological reflection, the author settles on the following definition of expository preaching:

> *...the working definition for expository preaching in this book is the following: the incarnational communication of the text of Godâ€™s word considering its historical, grammatical, and literary intention in a form that is faithful to the text and meaningful to the hearers in their sociocultural context, with the ultimate aim of enhancing total transformation into Christ-likeness.*

An implication of this is forms of preaching which work in one cultural context can not simply be applied to another.

> *Therefore, it is the task of preachers to discover the best form by which they can communicate to people in their various sociocultural backgrounds and realities.*

The cultural context of much of African society is one of "orality". Oral cultures are not simply ones in which people do not read; oral peoples tend to process information differently to literate peoples, focus on different categories and to be much more focussed on narrative than on step by step argument.

> *â€œThe Ifugao wanted stories and I gave them systematic theology, they wanted relationships and I gave them reasons, they wanted characters and I gave them categories.â€*

Ajibade explores the literature on orality, with a particular focus on Africa, bringing a theologian's

focus on his analysis. He is not uncritical in his reading and his justifications for an approach which acknowledges the oral context is both theological and pragmatic (in contrast to much missiology - which tends to be purely pragmatic).

> *Exposition means the literary, grammatical and contextual study, explanation and proclamation of Godâ€™s Word. It means proper exegesis and hermeneutics has preceded the tasks of pulpit proclamation. Orality is the medium, and biblical proclamation is the message.*

The book then goes on to explore ways in which expository preaching might be practiced in Africa in a way that makes it more relevant and understandable to an oral congregation.

> *The position maintained is that an understanding and utilization of oral elements from African tradition and culture will entrench and enrich expository preaching, making it more meaningful, generating more interest, and impacting more extensively those who listen to sermons.*

Although it might unnerve some Western preachers, Ajibade suggests that in an oral situation, songs, poetry and drama might be used as a support to expository preaching to make it more accessible. He is careful to insist that these activities should be scaffolding to support the exposition and not the focus of the sermon itself.

> *But what needs to be stated is that whatever oral elements are employed in expository sermons, the message of the Bible must be held sacred and sacrosanct.*

The book is not merely theoretical, the author put his principles into practice and elicited feedback from people from a variety of educational backgrounds. The results were clear, preaching with an oral focus communicated very effectively and people remembered the sermon for a considerable time.

> *The era of the gospel and its paraphernalia being â€œWesternâ€ is fast ending, and the quest for indigenization, inculturation, or Africanization calls for pulpit ministry that is*

> *indigenous. Orality best serves that quest.*

So who should read this book? Certainly it should be in the library of any Bible college or seminary in Africa. There are a growing number of organisations which take pastors from the West to Africa and elsewhere to teach local leaders how to preach; anyone going on those trips must read and study this book - if they don't they should stay at home! I would also argue that preachers in the UK, who have no plans to travel abroad, would benefit from this book. Preaching is something we take for granted, and reading a good theological exploration of the topic from a different cultural background can only enrich our understanding of what is actually happening. In addition, the issue of secondary orality is increasingly an issue in our context and we need to understand it. I'd also suggest that it is a good text for anyone who wants to gain an understanding of some of the issues surrounding orality.