

J. W. McGarvey as Preacher

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Without diminishing the creative and unique qualities of J. W. McGarvey's homiletical thoughts exhibited in this collection of sermon outlines, we can note that they reflect a standard homiletical approach that dominated the American Protestant pulpit throughout the 19th and most of late 20th centuries. Even though we do not have manuscripts of his sermons, a number of overlapping features were common and are evident and can be contrasted with dominant practice today.

First, the logic of the approach was deductive as opposed to the inductive movement of much contemporary preaching. McGarvey names his topic or thesis at the beginning of the sermon, unpacks this sermonic claim, and then applies it to the specific congregation to which he is preaching.

Second, the structure of this deductive approach is primarily propositional. Today, there is a move in homiletics away from reducing the sermonic claim to "points" even to the degree of maligning such sermons as always having three points, two jokes and one poem. McGarvey more often than not does structure his sermons around three points. We should remember how well this form has served the church in the past, especially in a day when the way people listened was shaped by an oral and written culture instead of one shaped by radio, movies, television and the internet successively. It is a teaching model based on the assumption that the listeners share certain ideas, vocabulary and faith experiences.

Third, the understanding of language behind the propositions is that homiletical and theological discourse is perspicuous. Today, it is common to think of theology and proclamation more in terms of evocation and metaphor while communication theories highlight the difficulty of communicator and recipient sharing meaning. Thus preaching is heavily laden with imagery and narrative. But in McGarvey's day it was assumed that theological meaning was best conveyed through clear, explicit biblical exposition and abstract concepts. Thus illustrations were sparser than they are in the pulpit today and were used to make the abstract message clearer as opposed to carry the full weight of the message (as is often the case in contemporary homiletics).

Finally, almost every one of McGarvey's sermons ended with exhortation that was evangelical and/or ethical in nature. The content of these exhortations follows common topics of the day. Notice how

sometimes the exhortation is only loosely connected to the propositional content of the earlier propositions in the sermon at best. Much of preaching today is certainly still hortatory in nature or turns to exhortation at the end of the sermon. But because of what we noted above about the understanding of the nature of language in homiletics since the 1970s, the application element of the sermon is often less explicit than it was a century ago.