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# FOR CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

Essays in service of the  
church and its mission

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For Christ and his church: Essays in service of the church and its mission

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# The pastor as poet

BY CYRIL GUÉRETTE

If you haven't yet heard it, every pastor is a wordsmith. Not necessarily a Wordsworth, but one who verily knows the Word's worth. Ever since the founder and cornerstone of the church, Jesus Christ, first read the prophet-poet Isaiah's words to the congregation, declaring himself their fulfillment, and began preaching the Good News in poetic images of seeds and birds, lost coins and oil lamps, the vocation of biblical oration has included verbal ornamentation.

After Christ, the poet-pastor Paul's words to the Philippians were read aloud, the hymn of the *kenosis kerygma* echoing in the ears of the hearers the humility of a King coequal with the Father coming in the form of a servant. Likewise, the best friend of Jesus' penned a Revelation whose barrage of imagery continually renews

imaginings generationally, while in service of his church in Ephesus this same John produced a Gospel still unrivaled literarily. Similarly, the Lord's brother James preached potent witty aphorisms with prophetic power and wisdom that puncture hearts even to this current juncture. With both content and structure the New Testament testifies to the power of poetic proclamation.

The early church fathers continued the tradition of pastors as poets. John Chrysostom the gold-tongued sung praises in the capital of the Empire, capturing and converting hearts to the cause of Christ. The great Gregory of Nazianzus, overseer of the council that consolidated the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople, wrote poetic orations which defended the deity of Christ against the Arians, and assured the divinity of the Spirit would become Christian orthodoxy. Ephrem the Syrian composed poems to counteract the gains made by the heresies of Bardaisan and his son Harmonius. Furthermore, both Gregory and Ephrem's poetic constructions called out the neo-pagan Emperor Julian as he attempted to push Christianity out of Roman territory. In the West, Augustine also wrote sermons filled with poetic devices, including an entire psalmic sermon against the faction of Donatus.

A millennium later, in the evangelical English tradition, John Bunyan stands out as a pastor whose poetic sensibility helped shape our entire language, while Andrew Fuller's own penchant for verse was an invaluable voice amongst the Baptists. Charles and John Wesley, Isaac Watts, John Newton and numerous others, all demonstrate that when a pastor puts their heart and mind to the poetic aspect of the calling, the results can be quite inspiring.

Yet, it is not simply history that attests to the poet as pastor, it is also the poetics of homiletics itself that requires every pastor pay attention to the aesthetic dimension. As Spurgeon called the pastor to give due diligence to the human voice, we observe an understanding of the relationship between poetry and the homily. In Greek, the term *poesis* itself refers to a creating, a making, and reminds us that it is easy to forget that in crafting any sermon, poetry is present. The linguist Roman Jakobson refers to the poetic element of language as a focus on the message itself, a fusion of form and function. Surely every pastor should thus respect the poetic as part and parcel of preaching. How the mes-

sage is constructed can sometimes be as important as what is being said.

Augustine hoped to train young future pastors in *On Christian Teaching*, dedicating sections to both the interpretation of Scripture and the formation of orations. He pointed out that in God is found both *Truth* and *Beauty*. If a pastor were to preach a sermon that was truthful in every detail, but had no beauty whatsoever, it would be boring, and cause many in the audience to miss out on the truth within completely. He himself had ignored the Christian faith for years because he considered its language unrefined, a misconception the poetic sermons of Ambrose helped dispel. On the other hand, if a sermon was the most beautiful in form and pleasant to the ear beyond compare, but taught falsehood, it would be worthless or worse yet, like a delicious meal that was full of poison. It is because of the danger of the potential pull of poetic fictitious lies that Augustine ultimately privileges the truth aspect of language over beauty, saying a good intellect doesn't love words but the truth in words. Still if a sentence is written with a profound truth but expressed without clarity (an element of beauty) then it can also be dangerous and accidentally misleading. Truth and beauty are inextricably intertwined and the goal of the preacher is to have both right instruction and delight coalesce in our words and reinforce each other so that both the truth and beauty of God are experienced in unity and draw the audience closer to him.

If the idea of pastors concerning themselves more consciously with beauty seems foreign, it must be remembered that the beauty of the Lord is a theme explored over and over in the Bible. The Psalms especially both discuss and display this aesthetic theme powerfully. The psalmist declares in Psalm 27:4, "One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple." The truth of God is evident throughout the Psalms, with many of the major attributes of God and propositions concerning created reality being clearly stated. At the same time, this propositional truth is clothed in the poetic forms of parallelism, simile, metaphor, merism, inclusio, chiasm, acrostic, metonymy, synecdoche, apostrophe, wordplays and many others, perhaps even including rhyme.

The prophets likewise found that one of the most effective ways to both communicate the truth of God, and produce the right emotional reaction to the word, was to utilize poetic devices and forms that engaged and sometimes even enraged the audience. The pastor must remember their affectivity as both priest and prophet increases as they embrace the reality that they are poets.

The preaching pastor is a poet simply by way of their oral proclamation. Reclamation of this reality can only assist in producing more effective vocal communication. For a sermon is not simply informative, but performative. The way the words sound can make more profound what we expound. This is grounded in the way in which God created humanity. From infancy, before comprehending a whit of a word, a child may giggle in sheer joy at a well-crafted rhyming sentence. It is this musicality of words, the tonality of utterance, with which God has gifted his people. And one may maintain that music is a mystery, which only God could explain. Pain and joy, fear and loathing, celebration and consolation, are all contained within the notes of the octave. Musicologists and aestheticians debate how exactly our emotions are evoked so provocatively through patterned sounds, but the phenomenological reality is undeniable. That words can map onto these musical notations and rhythms is the key to why truth and beauty in a pastor's speech is so important to recognize. The power of Martin Luther King Jr.'s refrain of "I have a dream" comes from matching the truth of his prophetic message with the beauty of his baritone intonations.

This musicality of words is an important piece of every preacher's repertoire, and something honed through practice, if not intentionality. The more conscious we become of its power, the more useful it becomes at our disposal. Thus it is my proposal that every pastor embrace their inner poet.

Practically the reality of the pastor as poet will be worked out in each pulpit, with the insight, sensitivity, and distinctive gifting of the individual creating a unique poetic voice as it exposit Holy Writ.

That being said, it may be of some use to offer some insights gained from poetically self-conscious study and practice for those awakening to the poetic reality of their vocation. In that light, I

would propose a few ways in which the idea of pastor as poet may become instantiated in the regular exposition of Scripture in the service of the church.

A simple way to begin exploring the poetic dimension of homiletics is to begin better utilizing already existent poems in the body of one's sermon. The psalms, prophets and poetic parts of narratives and epistles of Scripture are obviously great material in such usage. It is important to unleash the poetic quality of these passages as you deliver them orally, tapping into the ancient power of poetry that the Spirit of God providentially embedded within them. One should practice reading such passages beforehand, speaking them slowly and powerfully, expressing the emotion with which the heart of God wrote them. Each line should be given attention, including how they relate to both the preceding lines and antecedent. Raise your voice when the text demands it, and rush into a holy hush when it complements best. A great way to practice is to read through the psalms and prophets out loud to oneself in times of devotional study, as it will at the same time impregnate your own use of language with the linguistic rhythms that can only increase the poetic and emotional power of your original sermon compositions.

Building upon this, it is useful to begin to familiarize yourself with extra-biblical English poetry, especially Christian greats such as Milton, Herbert, Donne, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hopkins and Eliot. Likewise spend time reading to yourself the magnificent hymns of Watts, Wesley and Fanny Crosby. There is a unique appreciation for form and content that comes from reading these hymns as opposed to singing them. A great way to spice up one's sermons, and to help acclimatize the pastor to eventually creating their own poetry, is to pepper quotations from these poets, and other classics, into the body of your homily.

For development of more modern poetic sensibilities, I'd suggest listening to and reading the lyrics to modern Christian music, including the genre of Christian Rap or Holy Hip-hop. Likewise, there is a growing body of Christian spoken word readily available online (eg. Passion 4 Christ Movement). It can be argued that the sermon is a form of spoken word, even if it must, for sake of clarity, tone down the use of poetic devices comparatively. Whatever one's age, ethnicity or culture, familiarizing oneself with these



new popular expressions will form your own poetic sensibility and help reduce the probability of cheesy and corny uses of poetry in one's sermonizing and services. Quoting these artists, or incorporating their work into the service from time to time, is an effective way of allowing the power of the musicality and profundity of creative language to minister among the congregation.

If the previous recommendations are about immersing oneself in poetry, and utilizing others work, it is important to remember that you are a poet when crafting your own sermons. Most homiletics textbooks will at least pay lip service to this reality in their advice regarding structuring a sermon, and especially when it comes to the use of illustrations. The power of stories, or analogies, in homiletics is undeniable, and any pastor worth their salt knows the necessity of engaging the audience with such devices. The example of Jesus' use of parables further encourages every pastor to take seriously the use of illustrative material. The pastor becomes proficient at looking at every event in their day for sermon potential, often not recognizing that in doing so they are proving themselves to be poets. Embracing the reality of the pastor as poet will go a long way in freeing oneself to spend even more time developing and exploring this element of the sermon, not simply because it echoes a truth stated early in propositional format, but because it often better communicates the truth than a simple argumentative sentence ever could—hence why Jesus found stories one of the most important modes for his sermonizing, often giving only minimal or even no propositional follow up.

Moving from this area in which most pastors are comfortable with the use of a poetic device, it is important to understand that many other poetic techniques are at the disposal of the pastor. Repetition is one that is quickly recognizable; it is common practice to repeat a key phrase, or the same main point in different words, to be sure that the homiletic purpose of the individual sermon is fulfilled. Think again of Martin Luther King's continued repetition of the refrain, "I have a dream." This famous repetition did not cause boredom in the audience, but the exact opposite, it evokes the emotions in an unforgettable manner.

This principle can be further applied to the effectiveness of the repetition of sounds. Other very useful related poetic devices in

the modern sermon come from forms of sound repetition, especially alliteration (the repetition of the first letter or letters of words) and rhyme (the repetition of the sound of a syllable). A little alliteration allows all the literate in the congregation to alter their attention and attitude in appreciation to the Almighty's appropriation.

Now this is where many readers may begin to become a bit squeamish. It's one thing to read Scripture more dramatically, quote poems and hone sermon illustrations; it's another altogether to deliver timely rhyme and alliteration. This is true, and important to recognize. Firstly, if one has too much adoration for verbal ornamentation, it can quickly distract from the point of the sermon itself. If the audience is paying too much attention to the way the message is spoken, they might miss what is spoken. This is why the ancient teachers of rhetoric made clarity one of the most important qualities to incorporate into speech. Especially if one is dealing with a complicated bit of exegesis in a difficult passage, the last thing needed is to have jarring sentence structure affect the ability to concentrate. Secondly, if one delivers rhyme and alliteration in a manner too self-conscious it can affect their potential power to seal the doctrinal point home in the mind of the audience with a proper emotion that attends.

For these reasons, it is recommended that one does not draw attention to the fact that alliteration or rhyme are being used, their impact will be subconsciously just as powerful whether or not the audience is cognizant of the devices. For smoother delivery, it might be useful to fully write out the text manuscript in places where more poetic language is planned.

Short curt sentences are best;  
Set out simply from the rest.

This allows you to read from the script easily, and deliver the lines more effectively.

The point is to be conscious of the sound of the sermon, to pay attention to the oral dimension. Aristotle advises that highly emotional speech and poetic devices are best saved for conclusions, once the facts have been delivered to bolster your argument. Thus,

purposefully poetic elements can be useful at the end of major sermon sections, or even to summarize a powerful point in the middle of a section. The final conclusion of the sermon is one of the most important places to employ poetic devices. When one is helping the audience see how to respond to the truth teased out of a biblical passage, alliteration and rhyme can chime in subtly to support. Poetic language swoops in with the inherent power of the musicality of words, coupling the proper emotional response to the propositional content. The pastoral heart is serving by observing the oral arts.

This is the unity of verity and beauty in theology.  
With the psalmist the pastor can sing:

My heart is stirred by a noble theme  
as I recite my verses for the king;  
my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer. [Psalm 45:1]

Every pastor is a poet; it's about time we/they know it.