

Preaching As Counselling: Engaging the theory of Harry Emerson Fosdick for Pastoral Preaching in Africa

Rev. Paul A. Oladejo
Church Pastor,
Living Spring Baptist Church,
Bako, Ibadan
08035771336, 08058576004
paulabimbola08@gmail.com,

Rev. Ezekiel A. Ajibade (Ph. D)
Senior Lecturer of Christian Preaching
HOD, Department of Practical Theology
The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho.

DOI: [10.56201/ijrcp.v9.no1.2024.pg41.49](https://doi.org/10.56201/ijrcp.v9.no1.2024.pg41.49)

ABSTRACT

This paper is titled “Preaching as Counselling: Engaging the Theory of Harry Emerson Fosdick for Pastoral Preaching in Africa.” While some consider preaching and counselling as two different responsibilities of a pastor, Harry Emerson Fosdick forged a nexus between the two by theorising that preaching, rather than being “expository” should be a life-situation event. Using a simple qualitative approach, the study enumerated the elements of Fosdick’s theory of “preaching as counselling” which are that preaching should be congenial, convicting, transmissible and practicable. The theory can be faulted on the ground that Fosdick possessed a lopsided view of what expository preaching genuinely entails. Yet, it offers a lot of insights into what African preachers can do to lighten up their pulpits and address the existential needs of their congregations. The study therefore recommended that preachers should let their preaching focus on existential problems as much as is needed, apply biblical texts to practical life-situations, and let their sermons engender all-round church growth.

INTRODUCTION

Preaching and counselling have often been seen as two different tasks of the minister of the gospel. While one happens on the pulpit, the other takes place in the confinement of a room, office or some other private space. The skills are taught independently in seminaries, and the practices have rules that guide them. However, the concept of Pastoral Preaching is challenging the status quo as the preachers are coming to terms with the reality that their office as pastor and preacher makes them automatically a counsellor who must bear that burden and call across their ministerial responsibilities. This is the challenge that Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969) posed to the preaching world as far back as his days and which still resonates in contemporary times.

Fosdick’s concern is relevant in a context like Africa, where several existential needs stir the face of a preacher when he or she climbs the pulpit. All around is poverty, poor governance, lack of infrastructure, ethnic and tribal wars, terrorism and banditry, rape,

oppression and injustice. A lot of people come to church or listen to sermons because they want to hear their needs addressed. Many visit prayer houses and mountains because they feel these needs could be addressed. When a preacher is abstract and removed from the existential needs of his or her people, there is a tendency for such to lose members and make his or her ministry of no relevance to the people.

This paper, therefore, takes a look at Harry Emerson Fosdick's theory of "Preaching as Counselling" and what bearing that has on pastoral preaching. Lessons from this nexus are applied to preachers and preaching in the African context. When preachers are pastoral in their preaching, it helps grow the church and prepare the members to face the daily challenges that they encounter as real humans.

THE CONCEPT OF PASTORAL PREACHING

Pastoral preaching is the communication of the good news by one whose relationship to persons is that of a shepherd of souls. It is that preaching that concerns the edifying of the Saints (MacLennan, 1950, p. 26). Mbewe (2017) describes pastoral preaching as "shepherding God's flock through God's word" (p. 17). Pastoral preaching plays an integral role and takes the crux in the life of the church, especially in worship services.

Except in the cases of itinerants and those, perhaps, who minister solely through different electronic media, preaching takes place in a pastoral context. Preaching occurs in a pastoral context and in many significant ways, that context affects preaching. From conception to delivery and beyond, pastoral functions and relationships enter into the preaching ministry at every stage. The interpretation of the parishioners in their personal, domestic, political, and economic contexts does not replace but joins the interpretation of Scripture in its context to create the message.

Therefore, it would be correct to say that preaching not only occurs in a pastoral context but is itself a pastoral activity. From the perspective of the one who preaches, pastoral functions and relationships influence what to say in the sermon and how to say it. From the perspective of the listeners, the way the pastor touches their lives profoundly affects their views of the sermon (Craddock, 1986, p.37). Therefore, to say that the believing community experiences the same person as both preacher and pastor is not a modern phenomenon, but it is as old as the church itself. The church inherited from Judaism the image of the bold proclaimer with the heart of a shepherd. Sharp distinctions among prophets, priests, and pastors are more the work of modern commentators than descriptions of the tasks and roles of religious leaders. For instance, Samuel combined the roles of the leader, prophet, shepherd, and priest in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 7:15-17).

In most cases, the preacher and the pastor are one person. Because of multiple demands and the pressures of time, many ministers feel the tension between the two and occasionally wish they could be one or the other. However, others have felt the tension to be due not only to time but also to radical differences in the two functions. There is usually the question as to whether preaching and pastoring are contradictory and if any combination of the two would be erosive of the effectiveness of both. A school of thought opines that the same person cannot handle the two-edged sword of the Word of God and also tend the flock. This sharp and irreconcilable division of labour certainly does not spring from biblical beginnings. God can both "roar from Zion" (Amos 1:2) and also "feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in His arms" (Isaiah 40:11). Jesus was a preacher of repentance and the approach of the kingdom (Mark 1:14-15); and He also fulfilled Isaiah's vision of the servant of the Lord "...careful not to break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick" (Isaiah 42:1-3; Matthew 12:17-21).

It is not out of place to say that the distance between preaching and pastoring has been manufactured out of exaggerated descriptions and caricatured portraits of both. On the one hand, the preacher appears as a drone, full of authoritarian criticisms, moralistic scolding, sectarian loyalties, and promotional trivia. On the other hand, the pastor is cartooned as a passive pseudo-psychologist, relishing the intimate details of parishioners' private lives (Craddock, 1986, pg. 38). But preaching and pastoring now enjoy a healthier relationship of mutual enrichment; this is not to say the debate has ended. The field of homiletics continues to be nourished by two streams which carry a preacher-pastor tension.

Arthur L. Teikmanis observed that there are many parishioners in Sunday services of worship who have isolated themselves from the power and the love of God. Their spiritual channels have become blocked, and a preacher is called by God to help them break the log jam (Teikmanis, 1964, p. 63). It is therefore expected of preachers to apply biblical principles to help their listeners out of their problems in a way that they will see God at work through the preachers' message.

The interpretation of the parishioners in their personal, domestic, political, and economic contexts does not replace but joins the interpretation of Scripture in its context to create the message. The form and movement of the sermons represent a conscious effort to implement the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, whereby listeners are allowed to accept the responsibility for their believing and doing. Meanwhile, Mbewe (2017) opines that the responsibility of a pastor is to ensure the health and safety of the parishioners as his or her primary duty since they are vulnerable to diseases and wild animals if left on their own (p. 17). Therefore, the primary tool for pastoral preaching role is the Word of God as the preacher preaches, teaches, and uses it in counselling.

Pastoral preaching must help believers gain a comprehensive view of the content of the gospel. Pastoral preaching ought to help people to develop a working knowledge of the Bible. The preacher should be deeply aware of people's needs of instruction as to the worth of man's soul and the sacredness of human personality. All these and many other issues enter into the choice of preaching themes. Preaching is the heartbeat of pastoral responsibilities because any pastoral duty without a biblical exposition cannot be said to be God-centred.

Meanwhile, there are issues among people today that require pastoral attention and these issues are what Gary R. Collins discussed as the changes in counselling. He posits that there are expected and unexpected changes in people's life. How people respond to these changes will depend in part on their personalities, life circumstances, or past experiences in handling change (Collins, 2007, p. 4). Gospel ministers must be change specialists, and they have to help people cope with the changes that occur in their lives and make changes that will improve their lives.

FOSDICK'S THEORY OF "PREACHING AS COUNSELLING"

Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of Riverside Church, New York City, was the most influential figure in the shift from expository preaching to life-situation preaching. Fosdick rejected expository preaching not solely because he embraced the methods of biblical criticism but also because he believed that the personal problems of his parishioners were the central concern of the pulpit. (Fosdick, 1956, p. 92).

When he became convinced that the most vital dimension of his ministry was personal counselling, Fosdick developed his preaching to make it group counselling. He called the messages counselling sermons. The problems and needs of the listeners provided the subjects and themes and the personal conversation method of the counselling session provided the style. The Bible, the classics, and the reading in many fields nourished the messages, which reached

wider audience through prints and radio (Craddock, 1986, p. 943). He opined that preaching must have some peculiar features for it to benefit the audience; some of these features are discussed below.

Preaching Must Be Congenial

Congeniality means friendly, pleasant, and enjoyable. Fosdick believes that “every sermon should have for its main business the head-on constructive meeting of some problem which was puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives, and no sermon which has met a real human difficulty, with light to throw on it and help to win a victory over it, could possibly be futile.” (Fosdick, 1956, p. 94).

People love to laugh, and they spend so much money seeking entertainment. Preachers should be mindful of the fact that preaching should be congenial because it aids in presenting the message in a way people understand. Sermon offers a minister one of the most valuable opportunities to enhance the mental and spiritual health of the people. As in group counselling, effective preaching offers an efficient means of helping some individuals simultaneously. Preaching is proclaiming the gospel of transforming love, but proclamation becomes meaningful if it connects to the problems and choices that people face in their daily living.

John Beukema while corroborating Fosdick suggests that a sermon devoid of laughter may not be real in its ordinary appearance (Beukema in Robinson and Larson, 2005, p. 136). The goal of preaching is to have Jesus Christ formed in people, and the congeniality of a sermon will make the audience understand the message. He further asserts that preaching will always offend someone, but the solution is not flavourless speech. Rather, preachers must strictly monitor those things they intend to be friendly.

Preaching Must Convict

In Fosdick’s opinion, the preacher’s words must bring change in the hearers through the wise and profitable use of the Bible and hard work. The consistent inner character of the preacher must lift the preacher above the levels of the average (Bence, p. 22). Fosdick opines that ministers cannot afford to lack honesty even if eloquence and education are not there for them (Bence, p. 22). Preaching must proclaim the historical facts of Christ since the gospel is firmly rooted amid human history. Preachers must preach what God has done through Christ in human experience, what God has done, and what he is doing in their lives.

The object of preaching is not only a message but a message identified with a person. The Christian message is the person of Christ; preaching must induce an encounter between two persons, between Christ and humans in their innermost being. Effective preaching bears the mark of authentic testimony because the personal note in preaching encourages the hearers to have faith in what God can do and is doing now, as well as what he did in the past. It is expected that a preacher will preach Christ through the Scriptures and for a verdict. When this takes effect, the power of the Holy Spirit will back it up to transform lives.

Preaching Must Be Transmissible

Fosdick further opines that preachers should have explosive influence by employing the control of human emotion through transitional statements in their sermons. Transitional statement is the instrument in sermon that sustains the attention of the audience. Preachers who do not make use of this instrument in their sermons may have good ideas, but their sermons will lack innovative movement (Bence, 2019, p. 23). The intention of every preacher is to connect, motivate, and change the listeners’ point of view. Therefore, preachers must build transitional bridges between points in the key outlines.

Listening is hard work for the audience, and the quickest way to make an audience lose track is by failing to tell them where the sermon is heading (Davis, 2009, p. 207). Transitions

in sermon presentations provide mental guideposts because it tells the audience that something new is coming and that the previous element of the presentation is coming to a close. For instance, preachers can restate the point before declaring the next idea, or reaffirm the proposition or the big idea and link with the next point. Also, the preacher can emphasise clearly by variation in pitch. The preacher can also preview appropriately by stating the point and telling what follows. Restating the idea as the preacher progresses is another way of transiting (Peter Mead, www.biblicalpreaching.net).

Preaching Must Be Practicable

Fosdick also holds that the preacher's choice of relevant preaching topics starts with practical events, and this commands the hearers' interest as the sermon starts. The congeniality and convincing nature of the sermon with relevant truth sustain the interest. Fosdick opines that preaching should be conversational where the preacher freely raises questions and doubts appearing in the minds of the hearers and answers each one honestly (Bence, 2019, p. 23). The preacher is the intermediary between the demands of God and the needs of humans. Therefore, preachers must decide from the planning stage what they want to preach to, whether a problem, a concern or a live issue.

Critique of Fosdick's Theory

"Preaching as counselling," which is otherwise known as life-situation preaching, has its advantages. One of them is that it sharpens the evangelistic edge (Wiseman, 1977, p. 131). The sharpening is because sermons that solve real-life problems will draw people's interests far and wide. Preaching as counselling also saves preachers from offering vague generalities and preaching practically the same sermon every week. It speaks to vital issues, helps the pastor stay close to human reality, and offers divine assurance amid felt needs.

However, there are shortcomings in life situation preaching. One of the prominent dangers has to do with the violation of trust and confidence (Perry, 1980, p. 113). As preachers deal with people's problems on pulpits, they must beware of handling them inadequately because if not well handled in line with the scriptures, it may do more damage than good (p. 113). Preachers should, however, allow the Bible to solve the problem for people and not psychology. Too many problem-centred sermons may put problems into people's minds, whereas the sermon should lift their burdens and connect them to God. If preachers overstress people's problems, they could wholly be occupied with the issues of time, rather than with issues of eternity. They would thereby become merely timely and not timeless preachers. If preachers are going to preach to human needs, they must saturate themselves with the contents of the Scriptures since the Bible contains and describes every need (Perry, 1980, Pg. 114).

Fosdick's rejection of expository is worthy of note. It was a product of how expository preaching was done in his days, which he regarded as dull and futile because it did not connect with evolving needs of contemporary culture (Waymeyer, <https://bit.ly/3qXkFrA>). His view, however, does not represent a correct understanding of expository preaching. Expository preaching may involve what he called historical exposition of verses or chapters, as he rightly observed, but it goes beyond that. When biblical exposition is done by a Spirit-filled preacher who has carried out proper audience analysis and has properly illustrated and applied his or her text to meet the need of the congregation, it is effective and life-transforming (Olford and Olford, 1998, p. 69). This is why Richard Caldwell (2016) defined pastoral preaching as "expository preaching with a pastoral trajectory. It is expository preaching as the mean for pastoral work." (p. 25)

IMPLICATIONS OF FOSDICK'S THEORY FOR PREACHING IN AFRICA

The theory of Harry Emerson Fosdick has varying implications for preachers within the African context. Three of these are discussed.

Preaching Should Focus On Existential Problems

Some sermons today are out of touch with the realities of the existential situations of the people. Thor Hall opines that the major concern of gospel ministers should be how preaching, particularly the meaning of the biblical witness or the language of faith can make sense to the people. (Hall, 1971, p. 72). The Christian community considers the sermon a manifestation of the Word of God, and the church continues to gather around the word event that constitutes a language about God.

The implications of Fosdick's approach to pastoral counselling combined with expository preaching will reveal that the preachers will avoid speculative illustrations (Hall, 1971, p.73). They will shun all tendencies towards irrationality and contradiction as well as the disposition to seek compromise and accommodation. Darrell E. Luther opines that the preacher's task is to bring the two together, not by more preaching, but by better preaching (Wiseman, 1977, p. 119). Preachers with pastoral care experiences will preach more practical sermons that will answer the real questions of human existence.

Preaching should apply Biblical Texts to Practical Life-Situations

There is no human need that the Scriptures cannot address. Hence, the biblical text has a pivotal role in preaching because preaching is useless until the audience understands and can apply it to their lives and contemporary needs. Alistair Begg cited J. I. Parker that "preaching is letting the biblical texts talk (Begg, 2010, p. 12)." Many sermons today in Africa have paid scant attention to the Bible, and this is because some of the preachers are self-focused and consequently capable of only the most superficial impact upon the lives of listeners. Preachers should not compromise the centrality of the Bible in preaching for human needs. People come to hear how God is interested in them and their lives' challenges. (pp. 14-16).

Human needs should not eclipse the exposition of Scriptures, nor should preachers substitute any variety for biblical exposition. When human needs are the pivot of the preacher's sermon, the preacher may simply tailor the text to inspire their audience, encouraging people to solve their problems without any salvation experience and food for their souls (p. 17). The preacher would need to engage in counselling appointments which are an integral and indispensable element of sermon preparation because they provide the materials needed for contextualisation of preaching. They make sermons relevant, alive, and responsive to human needs (Steimle, Niedenthal, and Rice, 1980, p. 109).

Preaching, therefore, should be done from the standpoint of pastoral care, and pastoral care should also be done from the standpoint of preaching. Preachers should combine the good news of Christ and contemporary situation to face the people's real problems, help meet their difficulties, answer their questions, confirm their noblest faith, and interpret their experiences from the biblical point of view.

Preaching should Engender All-Round Church Growth

Preaching as counselling speaks to vital issues, helps the pastor stay close to human reality, and offers divine assurance within felt needs. When a sermon meets people's needs, it draws people's interests to such a congregation. Pastors who are alert will become aware of their people's problems as they carry on conversations with them after services. Here, they will seek to recognise their deep needs and not just hear their words which often hide these needs. Addressing those needs through the quality of the life of the pastor, and his or her preaching keeps the church healthy and alive every week. (Wiseman, 1977, p. 132).

It is, however possible that preaching as counselling may have negative effects on the growth of the church. One of the prominent dangers has to do with abuse of confidence reposed on the preachers. Perry opines that the preacher must beware of this temptation because it can negatively affect the growth of the Church (Perry, 1980, p. 113). As preachers deal with people's problems from the pulpit, they must beware of handling them inadequately to avoid dealing with them in a way that will cause more damage than good. Therefore, they must apply biblical principles from biblical passages to solve the people's problem.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the concept of "preaching as counselling" using the theory of Harry Emerson Fosdick as an impetus for effective pastoral preaching in Africa. Pastoral preaching is preaching that feeds the people of God as a shepherd feeds the sheep. It is unlike evangelistic preaching that invites sinners to salvation. It is such a critical need at various times of the church history that Harry Emerson Fosdick had to come with his unique genre of preaching termed as "preaching as counselling" or life-situation preaching. Life-situation preaching arising from Fosdick's theory challenges preachers to make their preaching congenial, convicting, transmissible and practicable. While the theory is subject to criticism, especially because of its lopsided view of expository preaching, there are lessons to be learned for African preachers if their message will make meaning to a continent that struggles with several existential needs because of its underdevelopment. So preachers in Africa are to let their preaching focus on existential problems as much as is needed, apply Biblical texts to Practical life-situations, and let their sermons engender all-round church growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Preachers must not place the people's needs above the Bible. People's needs are not substitutes for the biblical setting forth of God's way of salvation. The focus of the preachers must be to keep Christ preeminent in addressing the needs of their audience. Therefore, the preachers must apply the biblical truth to the people's situations, revealing God's intention for their lives while they find solutions to their life's experience.
- The congregation should have ways out of their prevailing challenges through pastoral preaching. The congregation should allow the Bible to address their problems. Since preaching takes place within the context of faith, it must have a focus no matter the type or form it takes and pastoral preaching applies the Bible to solve people's problem.
- The church should use pastoral preaching in applying the Bible in context of their situations and not to support or oppose what some people in the church opined, because the Bible should not be a supporting tool in the hands of the preachers rather it should spell what to do. The Church should let the Bible dictate the directions of their policies and traditions through pastoral preaching.
- The Christian community and the society at large should set their standards based on what the Bible recommends, and this can be done through pastoral preaching. Therefore, the pastoral preachers should also evaluate and solve life's challenges and behavioural issues within their societies through pastoral preaching which if properly applied will help in applying the Bible to find solutions to existential problems.
- Pastoral preachers should help in formulating good policies by applying the Bible in the context of experiences gathered within their society through

personal counsellings. These experiences should also aid contextual illustrations in pastoral preachings which will make sermons more relevant to the life's situations of people within the society.

REFERENCES

- Begg, A. (2010), *Preaching for God's Glory*, Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway.
- Bence, P. A., *An Analysis of the Effect of Contrasting Theologies of Preaching on the Teaching of Preaching in British Institutions of Higher Learning: A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD. at the University of St. Andrews*. Retrieved in www.research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/hal.handle.net.
- Caldwell, R. (2016) *Pastoral Preaching: Expository Preaching for Pastoral Work*. Nashville, Tennessee, Rainer Publishing.
- Collins, G. R. (2007), *Christian Counselling: A Comprehensive Guide*, (Third Edition), Nashville, Thomas Nelson.
- Craddock, F. B., (1986), *Preaching*, Nashville, Abingdon Press.
- Davis, J. O., (2009), *Gutenberg to Google: The Twenty Indispensable Laws of Communication*, Ibadan, Baptist Press Nigeria Limited.
- Fosdick, H. E., (1956), *Living of These Days*, New York, Harper and Bros.
- Hall, T., (1971), *The Future Shape of Preaching*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press.
- Maclennan, D. A., (1950), *Pastoral Preaching*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press.
- Mbewe, C. (2017), *Pastoral Preaching: Building a People for God*, Carlisle, Cambria, Langham Preaching Resources.
- Olford, D. L., (1989), *A Passion for Preaching: Essays in Honour of Stephen F. Olford*, Nashville, Tennessee, Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Olford, S. F. and D. Olford, (1998). *Anointed Expository Preaching*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group
- Perry, L. M., (1980), *Biblical Preaching for Today's World*, Chicago, Moody Press.
- Peter Mead, www.biblicalpreaching.net.
- Robinson, H. and Larson, C. B. (Ed.), (2005), *Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resources for Today's Communicators*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan.
- Steimle, E. A., Niedenthal, M. J., and Rice, C. L. (1980), *Preaching the Story*, Philadelphia,

Fortress Press.

Teikmanis, A. L., (1964), *Preaching and Pastoral Care*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall Inc.

Wiseman, N. B., (1977), *Biblical Preaching for Contemporary Man*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House.

Waymeyer, M. (2012). What Ever Happened to Expository Preaching?
<https://bit.ly/3qXkFrA>