

Using Ecclesiastes In Preaching And Teaching

Mike Wilson

Introduction:

- I. Part of “handling accurately the word of truth” is knowing how to use the sword of the Spirit to penetrate the deep recesses where soul and spirit are divided, joints and marrow meet, and the thoughts and intentions of the heart are discerned (II Tim. 2:15; Heb. 4:12). The Lord has given us a powerful tool in Ecclesiastes! Are we making full use of it? Do we recognize how it functions in relation to God’s redemptive plan?
- II. Yancey even suggests, “Not many sermons get preached on Ecclesiastes, for it is one of the Bible’s most confusing books. Many conservative Christians treat it with polite distaste, as if it had sneaked into the canon when no one was looking.” (161)

Body:

I. Observations for Preaching and Teaching

- A. To effectively utilize this book, a preacher must be aware of not only *what* is said but *how* it is said. How should the book be classified? How is the book’s truth communicated?
 1. “Protest literature” (Ryken, 275).
 2. “Wisdom literature.” The self-appointed designation of the author, *Qoheleth* – “the Teacher” or “Mr. Preacher” (Eaton, 55) implies either a literary device, or it “indicates that the author is distancing himself from his role as absolute monarch and taking on the mantle of the sage.” (Garrett, 264)
 1. “The first Existentialist” (Yancey, 145). Ecclesiastes certainly resonates, at times, with the despair of avant-garde philosophy, though at the end, despair gives way to hope.
 2. A former Hindu told me Ecclesiastes reminds him of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, except that in the *Gita* the cycles of life continue on and there is no resolution at the end.
- B. The answer to *why* we exist in Ecclesiastes is found more through firsthand experience than a burst of special revelation. We are privileged to go on the Grand Search through the eyes of one who had the wherewithal that eludes most of us. *Ecclesiastes is the most “inductively reasoned” book in the Bible.*
 1. In it, wisdom comes largely through observation.
 2. God is permitting him, and, through him, us as well, to see from an experiential standpoint that the historic pursuits of mankind are nothing but dead-end streets.
 3. The ultimate answer points to direct revelation (12:13-14), but the path getting there seems very indirect at times.
- C. Leland Ryken suggests that “a contrasting set of opposites organizes the entire book” (Ryken, 269). Eaton calls these contrasts “oscillations of thought” (37).
 1. Ryken tabulates 15 negative sections, 13 positive, and 3 mixed ones, in which the author vacillates between life “under the sun” and the “God-centered” life.
 4. “The unstated but controlling metaphor of the negative passages is the labyrinth or maze with its evershifting series of dead ends” (Ryken, 270-1).

5. This juxtaposition between negative and positive creates a tension until the only logical conclusion, hinted at throughout the book, is the only thing that hasn't evaporated with the wind at the book's end.

II. Using Ecclesiastes in Evangelism

- A. Over the years I have used the following format as an entree in personal and small group Bible studies to hundreds of people, with enormous success. I almost never fail to whet outsiders' appetite for more. Obviously, not everyone has eventually obeyed the gospel, although several have. I've even turned this format into a mini-seminar during gospel meetings. Here is the territory I cover in a typical 45 minute session:

D. The Cyclical Nature of Life -- Eccl. 1:1-11

1. Three illustrations:
 - a. Sunrise, sunset -- v. 5
 - b. Circular courses of the wind -- v. 6
 - c. The evaporation cycle -- v. 7
2. Life is like an endless race track, but are we really getting anywhere?
 - a. Generations come and go, but life goes on...
 - b. There's nothing new under the sun.... Even with the passing of time, it's business as usual! ("been there, done that")
 - c. cf. 3:1-11, which prompted the lyrics, "There is a season... Turn, turn, turn"

B. The Emptiness of Worldly Preoccupations -- 2:1-11

3. With the drive of a type-A personality, the author tries to break the endless cycle by embarking on a grand Search for Happiness
 - a. He has it all: fame, power, money and women (cf. I Kings 4:21-34; 10:1,7; 11:3)
 - b. Unfortunately, his frame of reference is rather selfish (notice how often "for myself" is repeated in vv. 4-8)
4. Leading question for evangelistic studies: "If I only had _____, then I'd be happy!"(?)
 1. Here was a man with "everything"! Was he happy? NO!
 - a. He was miserable! None of these pursuits brought lasting fulfillment.
 - b. Everything is "vanity" and "striving after wind"

E. The Inescapable Conclusion -- 12:1-8,13-14

1. The brevity of life
 - a. "Childhood and the prime of life are fleeting" -- 11:10
 - b. We're all getting older, and the grave awaits -- 12:1-8
2. The compelling conclusion is that this life is a probationary period for a day of reckoning, beyond which we will be rewarded or punished -- 12:13-14
 - a. The God who grants you life and breath has invested your life with infinite purpose and meaning

- b. Whether or not you take advantage of your opportunity is of vital importance
 - c. Why do you exist? To “fear God and keep His commandments”
 - d. In all this, we have failed miserably and need a Savior....
2. Driving the point home
- e. Can our lives have any purpose and meaning in the absence of accountability before God?
 - f. If you take Judgment Day out of the picture (as in life “under the sun”), then we are nothing but specks of dust on a revolving ball in a solar system, in a much bigger galaxy, in a universe so gigantic that it staggers the imagination. I.e., *we aren't worth very much!*
 - g. On the other hand, with an ultimate day in court with the Almighty awaiting us, with eternity hanging in the balances, then every word, deed, and thought are suddenly invested with eternal importance.
 - h. The point is that our inherent worth and value are inextricably tied to the Judgment. There's no getting around it!
- III. Hugh Hewitt, who suggests reading Ecclesiastes and then reading the Gospels as a means of turning the tide in our society, (which I stumbled across long after I had already adopted the same approach) says:
- A. “Ecclesiastes reminds us that the cover stories in *Time* magazine, the Oscar speeches, and the State of the Union addresses are in the process of crumbling into dust before they can begin; so it is of no consequence whether the dominant opinion class sneers at or ignores expressions of belief. All of our pastimes, pursuits, careers, hobbies, hopes, and fears boil down to a chasing after wind. Once that central fact is grasped – really understood – the believer cannot be embarrassed.” (Hewitt, 192-3)

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