

Preaching and the life of study

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Fred Craddock, who taught preaching and New Testament at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, [died last Friday](#) at the age of 86. Those of us who preach know his name well. It was simply not possible to go through seminary and fail to encounter his writings in homiletics (preaching) courses. I have read just about everything he wrote. His wisdom influenced my scholarship and my preaching in a profound way.

The first book I read by Craddock many years ago was simply entitled [Preaching](#). The portion of the book I remember the most is chapter four, "The Life of Study." His emphasis on study, not as the means to the end of writing a sermon but as a way of life out of which sermons grow, is a lesson I have never forgotten. He writes,

When the life of study is confined to "getting up sermons," very likely those sermons are undernourished. They are the sermons of a preacher with the mind of a consumer, not a producer, the mind that looks upon life in and out of books in terms of usefulness for next Sunday. The last day of such a ministry is as the first, having enjoyed no real lasting or cumulative value in terms of the minister's own growth of mind, understanding or sympathy. Studying only for the next sermon is very much like clearing out of the wilderness a small garden patch, only to discover the next week that the wilderness has again taken over.

Of course, in one sense the life of study has been rather easy for me. I love to study. But as Craddock notes the temptation to allow the other demands of pastoral ministry to get in the way of the life of study can be too great. Once the life of study is seen as a luxury in pastoral ministry and not a necessity, not only will the sermon suffer along with the congregation that is listening, but the spiritual life of the pastor will suffer as well.

One of the reasons I think I have learned so much from Craddock over the years is because he did not separate his studious (scholarly) life from his devotional life. All

too often that is exactly what clergy do, as if the deeply intellectual ponderments of the faith get in the way of the warm and fuzzy and simple devotional writings that Craddock said offer about nine calories a serving. Craddock's work reinforced to me that it was okay to devote myself to study and that scholarly work could and would draw me closer to Jesus Christ, which it has.

John Wesley would have found a kindred spirit in Fred Craddock in reference to the life of study. Although Wesley famously claimed to be a "man of one book," the Bible, he was also clear on the necessity to read and study other materials as well. When it came to his lay preachers who didn't like to read, saying they only needed the Bible, Wesley advised them to learn to like it or return to their former trade.

Craddock's direct and honest words get at Wesley's counsel to learn to like reading:

Let's look study straight in the face and call it what it is. Study is work, often hard work, and just as often having no immediate fruit in terms of solution to a problem, counsel to a parishioner, or message for next Sunday. Motivation has to be nourished by deep springs because frequently it is not the case that what we *have* to do can be transformed into what we *want* to do.... The work is hard, and sometimes accompanied by pain and fear....

One fears to plow through a new volume if there is a chance that a favorite landscape will be bulldozed in the process. One fears discovering a truth which will demand rethinking several views and changing the mind. One fears that somehow the knowledge will somehow negate the pleasures of naïvete.

I readily confess that the life of study has not left me unchanged. Over time, certain things I used to believe I no longer do, while other things I believed when I was younger have been strengthened. But such is the wild and surprising journey of searching for the truth. And if we Christians truly believe that all truth is God's truth, then why avoid the adventure of the life of study?

Fellow preachers, let not our finished sermons each week be the end of our study. Let us all take some advice from our wise teacher Dr. Craddock and let them grow out of the fertile soil of the life of reading and study. The life of study will be a blessing to those who preach the gospel—and to those who hear it.

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