

THE FOOLISHNESS OF PREACHING

A Study of the Relevance of Preaching to the Contemporary Church

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INTRODUCTION

For the past five years I have been involved in ministering to inmates through Bible studies and Sunday services. Three years ago when our family moved to Portland, so that I could attend Seminary, I took the opportunity to join a prison ministry that is internationally known. I joyfully accepted the ministry field of the drug and alcohol unit in a new state prison. Those early months of ministry were marked with a special blessing from God's hand. In fact, it seemed as if we were experiencing a miniature revival in the unit.

When the state director of the prison ministry heard the reports of God moving in a unique way, he made an appointment with me, to find out what was actually happening. I sat there and enthusiastically reported to him about two solid conversions, a hunger for the things of God among the inmates, and staggering numbers in attendance. He listened and rejoiced with me. Then he asked the question, "What are you doing?" I was not quite sure about the nature of the question, and so he clarified, "What is your format?" I told him that on Thursday nights we had 20-30 minutes of prayer and then 1.5 hours of Bible study, and on Sundays we had 20 minutes of singing, some prayer time, and a 45-50 minute message. His response shocked me. "You really lecture and preach at the inmates for all that time? Maybe you should start trying some other more effective methods." When I told him that the methods in use were obviously effective, his answer was that, "Inmates will only let you preach at them for so long."

The point was clear, preaching does not work. The methods must accommodate the listeners so that the message will be more readily accepted. And preaching, as a method of communicating the message, does not fit in with a 20th century audience. Those who are in touch with society have pronounced the death of preaching, and the evangelical church has bought it to one degree or another. There are some who would like to see preaching done away with, and substituted with something more effective.¹ Others, convinced that other methods must be employed to reach the present generation, are content to tolerate preaching, as long as it does not get in the way of real worship and ministry. Most however, see preaching as a ministry of the church, which is not quite equal to other ministries, but still valid, somehow.

There can be no doubt that the days mentioned in Amos 8:11 are applicable to us today, "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord God, "When I will send a famine on the land. Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, But rather for hearing the words of the LORD." Theology Professor Dr. Nickolas Kurtaneck has stated, "Preaching has seldom experienced the luxury of praise. This fact has been well-documented by numerous books related to the subject of preaching. Fant underscores this point by noting that no generation of preachers has escaped criticism, for even during the

¹For example, Clyde Reid in The Empty Pulpit (Harper and Row, 1967), has stated, "We cannot yet see the full impact of this newly emerging man with his new modes of perceiving truth. We do not yet know fully what it means for preaching. It certainly means that we cannot continue as before, for there are many signs that people do not hear preaching anymore, and particularly do not hear it in such a way as to influence their behavior at deep levels" (60).

so-called Golden Age of Preaching when Liddon, Spurgeon, Parker, Beecher, MacLaren and Brooks were at the height of their careers, Mahaffy wrote The Decay of Preaching in 1882. However, the current crisis in the pulpit ministry is particularly acute."²

Another, who is no friend of preaching, has stated, "The pulpit today is empty in the sense that there is often no message heard, no results seen, and no power felt."³ Criticisms such as these, often valid, abound. Preaching, indeed, has "fallen on hard times." As the distaste for preaching grows, and as preaching continues to decline, there is increasing pressure to use substitute methods. Many decry preaching and push for alternatives. Few stand and call for a reformation of good preaching. Others are indifferent and roll with the flow. But the issues must be addressed, the questions must be asked. The questions that need to be asked and answered are, "Is preaching merely cultural? Is preaching an optional method of communicating the message? Or is preaching a timeless mandate, given to the Church from God in His Word?" These are the vital questions, and they demand vital answers.

In the following pages, the modern influences on contemporary preaching will be briefly examined. The question, "Why is preaching in the state that it is in?" is crucial to answer from the start. A brief history of preaching will then be given to

²Nickolas Kurtaneck, "Are Seminaries Preparing Prospective Pastors to Preach the Word of God?" Grace Theological Journal 6.2 (1985), 362.

³Clyde Reid, The Empty Pulpit, 9.

display the primacy of preaching in the history of the Christian church. Then the essence of preaching will be examined, to answer the question, "What is preaching?" The mandate to preach will then be investigated, primarily from the pastoral epistles. Then the power of preaching will be looked at, from the First Corinthian epistle. Finally, a section of exhortation and application will be directed towards ministers concerning a revival of powerful, biblical preaching, which is so needed in our churches today.

Without apology, this essay is a defense of preaching. Our history and heritage point us to preaching. The very act itself, biblically defined, compels us to preach. The mandate commands us to do no less. And the power of preaching, as revealed in the Word and history, drives us to a holy dissatisfaction, but not to despair. The message and the method must receive the place of prominence in our churches, and this is what I hope to demonstrate.

MODERN INFLUENCES ON CONTEMPORARY PREACHING

It is fallacious to attribute any one reason to a decline of preaching in our day. There are a multitude of factors that have contributed to a weak pulpit, and I do not pretend to exhaust the list, and give a conclusive diagnosis. However, in one way or another, the following influences have affected attitudes towards preaching, and preaching itself.

A GENERAL LACK OF PIETY AND CREDIBILITY IN THE MINISTRY

The first influence to be mentioned, which has had a definite impact on preaching, deals with the man who delivers the message.

Good preaching, preaching which draws the people of God into communion with God, and can truly be called the "utterances of God" (1 Pet. 4:11), is the impetus to high levels of piety and Christian maturity. In turn, this personal piety in the life of the preacher is the springboard to that good preaching. As Albert Martin has noted, "The soil out of which powerful preaching grows is the preacher's own life."⁴ The principle is that out of the godly heart of a pious man, whom God has called to His work, often flows the powerful preaching that is generally absent today. In turn, that preaching is the catalyst to increased piety among God's people.

Therefore, where there is a lack of holiness, godliness, righteousness, credibility and integrity in the ministry, there will be a dearth of powerful biblical preaching. There is a strong connection between the purity of the messenger and the power of the message. Such passages as 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13 and 2 Tim. 2:20-21 display this connection. It should be remembered however, that, "Neither the gift of teaching nor the mantle of credibility empowers the Word; both simply release it under the most favorable conditions. The gift of teaching just adapts the swordsman to the Sword. The cloak of credibility simply corroborates one witness with another."⁵

Nobody can deny that the clergy of our day, in many cases,

⁴Albert N. Martin, What's Wrong with Preaching Today? (Banner of Truth, reprint 1992), 5.

⁵James W. Andrews, Unpublished Lecture Notes, "Reinstating a Credible Witness," pg. 3, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary.

lack credibility and integrity rooted in godliness and purity. Again, this is not the only cause of dismal preaching, but it is still a cause. If it is a scathing indictment against clergymen of our day, then so be it. God's Word declares that purity is connected with power, where there is no purity, there will probably be no power.⁶ Where there are men who believe like M'Cheyne that, "My people's greatest need is my holiness," and then pray earnestly, mourning over sin and longing after holiness, like M'Cheyne, there will probably be the powerful preaching like that of M'Cheyne's.

A WEAKENED MESSAGE

A second influence that has impacted preaching today is the actual content of most sermons, in other words, the message itself. We live in an era where we get to hear "How to be..." and "How to do..." sermons. We live in an era where the pulpit is the place of helpful hints. Lloyd-Jones has summed up the feeling of many when he sarcastically remarked, "Preaching, of course, is something carnal lacking in spirituality, what is needed is a chat, a fireside chat, quiet talks, and so on!"⁷

When the preacher, no matter how spiritual and godly, moves his content from the Bible directly, to other areas of interest, he loses the authority and power that are inherent in the Word. His

⁶I fully recognize that God has and does use vessels who are dirty and even unregenerate, but I would argue that those are the exceptions and not the rule, and the principle stands.

⁷D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Preaching and Preachers (Zondervan, 1972), 16.

talks on this and that may be insightful and helpful, but the power of the Word preached will be woefully absent. For preaching to be powerful and effective, it must be expositional in nature.⁸ Needless to say, the temptation to be clever, helpful, palatable, and popular, as well as the laziness of not laboring in the Word and doctrine, has moved many preachers into a non-expository type of preaching, which has short-circuited the power of preaching, and has contributed to its decline.

MODERN COMMUNICATION THEORY

Now we move to more ideological influences, which perhaps are related in some cases to the first two mentioned. Without a doubt, one of the pervading influences which has cast doubt on the efficacy of preaching and has challenged it as a viable method of communication, is modern communication theory. In all the books which attack preaching, modern communication theory fills the pages as the geniuses stack up their evidence. Preaching a monological sermon is naive in light of modern communications. Monologue is out, dialogue is in. For instance, missiologist Charles Kraft has said,

It is simply a myth, supported on the one hand by a historical fallacy (that is the way the early church did it) and on the other by inadequate translation (of the Greek word "kyrusso") that gives the impression that monologue preaching is God's intended way of getting his message out. There is no magic in this (or any other method). Jesus Himself seemed to prefer dialogue, interactional communication that encourages immediate feedback and, *if necessary, adjustment of the message to

⁸This subject will be dealt with later, under the essence of preaching.

assure greater relevance.⁹

The Cybernetics Revolution¹⁰ has told us that people cannot listen to sermons anymore. Television has destroyed most people's ability to comprehend, process, and decide. Neil Postman, comparing the audience of a Lincoln-Douglas debate (which lasted 7 hours) with modern Americans, writes, "Is there any audience of Americans today who could endure seven hours of talk? or five? or three? Especially without pictures of any kind?"¹¹

With mushy brains and short attention spans, today's congregations are accommodated with short sermons, filled with interesting stories, visual aids, and/or discussion groups. Humor, wit and story-telling are at a premium for today's preacher. The acrostic K.I.S.S. has taken on new significance for preachers, it not only means "Keep It Simple Stupid," but also "Keep It Short Stupid." And so the theories of communication govern the activities of most pulpits today. The Holy Spirit does not factor into the equation, and so any effort to challenge an audience with a solid exposition that requires thinking and concentration is scorned. The essence and power of preaching are ignored as many ministers bow the knee to the sociologists, psychologists, and

⁹Charles H. Kraft, Communication Theory For Christian Witness (Abingdon Press, 1983), 44. The italics are his.

*Notice that Kraft asserts that God incarnate might have adjusted His message (not only His method) for greater relevance.

¹⁰See John Stott, Between Two Worlds, pps. 64-83, for an good discussion of this subject.

¹¹Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (Penguin Books, 1985) 45.

communication theorists, and take their cue from their research.

CONSUMERISM

Another troubling influence on preaching is what is commonly called "consumerism." This philosophy of ministry is rooted in advertising and marketing techniques, and in essence sees the unsaved (euphemistically referred to as the "unchurched") as the ultimate consumers. The responsibility of the church is to effectively market its product to its consumer. This bankrupt perspective impacts preaching very heavily. For example, hear what one of the leaders of this movement has said in relation to preaching, "Unchurched people today are the ultimate consumers. We may not like it, but for every sermon we preach, they're asking, "Am I interested in that subject or not?" If they aren't, it doesn't matter how effective our delivery is; their minds will check out."¹²

This influences what the preacher preaches, and how the preacher preaches. "Preach to people's virtues. Don't be negative and talk about their sins," was the advice of one church planter who spoke in our seminary's chapel service. What ever happened to preaching a gospel of sin, grace, faith and repentance? This type of compromising, accommodating preaching has put effective preaching into a tailspin, and has produced weak, uncommitted churches, as many have testified. It pumps up the numbers quickly, but the growth is an artificial, steroid growth, which will

¹²Bill Hybels, Stuart Briscoe, Haddon Robinson, Mastering Contemporary Preaching (Multnomah, 1989) pg. 31.

collapse and die. Is this too harsh? How many consumers are into giving instead of receiving? How many consumers are interested in sacrifice instead of gratification? The consumer-oriented church, fed on consumer-oriented preaching is a foreigner to picking up crosses, denying self, and following Christ, no matter what it costs them.

Eugene Peterson has well observed the impact of this modern influence upon the church and her ministers, and too few are taking heed today.

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns-how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money. Some of them are very good shopkeepers. They attract a lot of customers, pull in great sums of money, develop splendid reputations. Yet it is still shopkeeping; religious shopkeeping, to be sure, but shopkeeping all the same. The marketing strategies of the fast-food franchise occupy the waking minds of these entrepreneurs; while asleep they dream of the kind of success that will get the attention of journalists.¹³

This mentality has crippled the church. It has weakened the pulpit. Whenever a man stands to preach, with the view of pleasing his audience, and "keeping them tuned in," he has ceased to be a mouthpiece of God, and he has stopped being pleasing to God (Gal 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:4). We stand to please the One who sent us, if the message does not please men, we do not change it! Jesus did not change it (contrary to Kraft, see Matt. 13:10-17; Mk. 12:1-12 and Jn. 6:52-66 for examples), the Apostles did not change it, nor

¹³Eugene Peterson, Working the Angles, The Shape of Pastoral Integrity (Eerdmans, 1987), pg.1.

did the Reformers. The message was preached, whether it was grace and forgiveness, or sin and Hell, and the chips were left to fall where the Sovereign saw fit. O how different from today!

WORSHIP RENEWAL

Although there are some good and helpful aspects within the worship renewal movement, there are also some troubling aspects. In relation to preaching, the worship renewal movement has created a bifurcation between preaching and worship, as well as preaching and congregational participation. Robert Webber, a leader in this movement, has proposed that the church, "Acknowledge the distinction between services for worship and services for teaching."¹⁴ Strangely enough, after affirming that, "The preaching of the gospel always contains teaching, and teaching always contains the preaching of gospel,"¹⁵ he then states that "preaching in the context of worship is not teaching. Rather, it is at the time when the work of Christ is proclaimed and applied to the lives of God's people."¹⁶ Whether this encompasses the actual exposition of the Word of God is unclear. It would seem from other comments that the reading of the Word, with a few comments, would meet the proclamation requirement.¹⁷

¹⁴Robert Webber, Worship Old and New (Zondervan, 1982), pg. 194.

¹⁵Robert Webber, Worship Old and New, pg. 125.

¹⁶ibid.

¹⁷see Robert Webber, Worship is a Verb (Word, 1985), pps. 73-77. In this section entitled, "God Speaks and Acts," preaching is mentioned once, whereas the main thrust is simply upon the reading of the Word as the vehicle for God speaking.

It appears that preaching is not worship because, according to many, the congregation does not participate. It is a one-man show, where the congregation is simply left to spectate. "In pastor and platform-centered worship, involvement in Scripture has been, by default, taken away from the people and left to the clergy."¹⁸ Although Webber has a good point in stating that we grossly neglect the reading of the Scriptures, his view of congregational participation is short-sighted. Although these two errors will be dealt with affirmatively under the section, "The Essence of Preaching," it should be noted that the propositions of the worship restorationists greatly minimize the importance of preaching, and by their erroneous assertions, they turn preaching into a spectator sport, rather than acknowledging that it is the hub of worship, and the pinnacle of participation.

What grows out of the concerns of the worship renewal movement is a reemphasis on such aspects of worship as liturgy, art, drama, music, sacramentalism, responsive readings, and the like.¹⁹ Aesthetically oriented worship is highly valued in this movement, and any attempt to put preaching at the center of the worship activity of the church is scorned.²⁰ Ironically, even in the

¹⁸Robert Webber, Worship is a Verb, pg. 95. The italics are mine, to indicate the pejorative manner in which Webber refers to the worship that is centered upon the ministry of the Word.

¹⁹For an example of evangelicals reverting to an Anglo-Catholic worship, see Robert Webber, Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail (Jarrell, 1985).

²⁰Ronald Allen and Gordon Borrer, Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel (Multnomah, 1982) pps. 187-188.

segments of the Reformed church which maintained elements of liturgy, the liturgy was seen as subservient to the ministry of the Word.²¹ However, in many instances, the worship renewal movement seeks to put these other aspects of worship in the place of the ministry of the Word. The Reformation put the pulpit at the center of the church, as Dabney reminds us, "The great Reformation was emphatically a revival of gospel preaching."²² The worship renewal movement seeks its removal off to the side. German theologian Helmut Thielicke has aptly stated, "Anybody who keeps in mind the goals of the Reformation once set for itself can only be appalled at what has happened in the church of Luther and Calvin to the very thing its fathers regarded as the source and spring of Christian faith and life, namely, preaching."²³

As long as it is maintained that preaching is not an actual act of worship, and that it is a passive, non-participatory ministry in the church, it will be powerless. As long as aesthetically pleasing ministries (many valid, in their respective place) are the focal point of the service, the congregation will be left empty. "Music and the imitative arts are designed primarily, to gratify taste. Their immediate aim is at the sentimental affections of the soul. But the immediate end of eloquence

²¹See Helmut Thielicke, The Trouble with the Church (Harper and Row, 1965), pg. 97.

²² R.L. Dabney, R.L. Dabney on Preaching, Lectures in Sacred Rhetoric (first published, 1870, Banner of Truth reprint, 1979), pg. 26.

²³Thielicke, The Trouble with the Church, pg. 1.

(Dabney's term for preaching) is to produce some practical volition."²⁴ This fact often seems forgotten.

PASTORAL COUNSELING

It seems that a clear implication from the shepherd metaphor used for ministers of congregations (e.g. 1 Pet. 5:2) is the responsibility to counsel and offer Biblical advice to God's sheep. Pastoral counseling has always been a part of the ministry. Helping in areas such as pre-marital and marital counseling, consoling at crucial times in people's lives, and spiritual guidance, has always been a major role for any pastor. However, within one generation counseling has exploded, so that C. Stephen Evans has observed that we now live in a "therapeutic society."

One of the results has been the expectation for the pastor to be much more than a source of moral and spiritual guidance, now he is often expected to be a therapist, a mental health physician. As a result, many pastors are buried under heavy counseling loads, counseling beyond their ability (in many cases), and amputating their time for the study and preparation for the ministry of the Word.

When this point was made in one of the essays I wrote in a Counseling in Ministry course, the professor wrote, "It is short sighted to view pulpit ministry as the only or even primary method of spiritual nurturing." On the one hand, there are many advocates for less preaching and more counseling, and on the other, there are

²⁴R.L. Dabney, R.L. Dabney on Preaching: Lectures in Sacred Rhetoric pg. 30.

pastors who are helplessly bogged down with counseling loads that rob their time. In both instances, the ministry of the Word suffers as preparation time, academic and spiritual, is swallowed up. The end result is a poorly prepared sermon and preacher, and an anaemic congregation.

Christian psychiatrist John White gives some keen insight into this very relationship:

Over the past fifteen years there has been a tendency for churches to place reliance on trained pastoral counselors... To me it seems to suggest weaknesses in or indifference to expository preaching within evangelical churches... Why do we have to turn to the human sciences at all? Why? Because for years we have failed to expound the whole of Scripture. Because from our weakened exposition and our superficial topical talks we have produced a generation of Christian sheep having no shepherd. And now we are damning ourselves more deeply than ever by our recourse to the wisdom of the world. What I do as a psychiatrist and what my psychologist colleagues do in their research or their counselling is of infinitely less value to distressed Christians than what God says in His Word. But pastoral shepherds, like the sheep they guide, are following (if I may change my metaphor for a moment) a new Pied Piper of Hamelin who is leading them into the darkest caves of humanistic hedonism. A few of us who are deeply involved in the human sciences feel like voices crying in a godless wilderness of humanism, while the churches turn to humanistic psychology as a substitute for the gospel of God's grace.²⁵

SUMMARY

Although I have only catalogued a few influences on contemporary preaching, it seems clear that preaching is being attacked, directly or indirectly, and either through ideological influences, or the practical influences of the demands of ministry.

²⁵Quoted from John White's Flirting with the World (Shaw, 1982, pps. 114-117) in Rediscovering Expository Preaching (Word, 1992), pg. xvi.

Whatever the case, preaching today is in a weakened condition, in desperate need of reformation, revival, and a renewed recognition of its primacy in the Christian church. In the words of John Stott, "Preaching is indispensable to Christianity."²⁶ In the pages that follow, I hope to demonstrate this indispensability, and present a Biblical argument that compels us to take seriously the preaching of the Word.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PREACHING

Preaching, to one degree or another, has been at the center of God's activity in human history. From the earliest times preaching has been used by God to communicate with mankind. Enoch, who walked with God (Gen. 5:22), preached judgement to his generation (Jude 14-15). Noah, who found favor in God's eyes (Gen. 6:8), was a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5). It is also interesting to notice that after God declares His covenant with Abram (Gen. 12:13), and then appeared to him at Shechem (12:6-7), that Abram went to Bethel, pitched a tent, built an altar, and "called upon the name of the LORD" (NASB). However, the word קָרָא should be translated "made proclamation (or preached) Yahweh by name."²⁷ Ross goes on to comment, "The interesting feature about this proclamation at the altar is the substance- the name of the

²⁶John R.W. Stott, Between Two Worlds (Eerdmans, 1982), pg. 15.

²⁷Allen P. Ross, Creation and Blessing (Baker, 1988), 267. This rendering was made by Luther in his translation, and is also supported by the semantic range in BDB (894-985), as well as other contexts (e.g., Gen. 4:26).

LORD (i.e., the attributes and activities of the Lord."²⁸ Abram, as an act of worship, proclaimed Yahweh, His character and attributes, at Bethel.

This tradition continues with Moses, who expounded the Law to the Israelites after they had crossed the Jordan (Deut. 1:5). Joshua, at Shechem, preached a farewell sermon, exhorting God's people to obey and serve the God of the covenant (Josh. 24:1-28). The significance of preaching during the periods of the prophets is unquestionable. "These preachers came to people and kings with their messages from God. Their message began with the phrase, "Thus saith the LORD." They pleaded, warned, rebuked, encouraged; they spoke of judgements; they inspired with glowing promises of the glory to come."²⁹ The latter prophets were no less significant. In fact, the prophets have been called the "covenant enforcement mediators,"³⁰ and their lawsuits came against Israel and Judah in their preaching.

During the post-exilic return of Ezra and Nehemiah, Ezra "set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). In Nehemiah 8, Ezra stood behind a pulpit and preached the Word of God, and the people responded with worship (Neh. 8:4-6). And so goes the history of preaching in the Old Testament. Its centrality

²⁸ibid.

²⁹J.S. Baird, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, edited by W.A. Elwell, (Baker, 1984), 868.

³⁰Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Reads the Bible For All Its Worth, (Zondervan, 1982) 151.

and significance cannot be missed.

"John the Baptist was the connecting link between the OT and the NT. He was the last and greatest of the prophets and the first preacher of the new era."³¹ The core of John the Baptist's ministry was preaching, which led to the preparation for the Messiah, through a baptism of repentance (Mk. 1:2-4). And even when Messiah appeared, and had all things at His disposal to make Himself known, He chose preaching as His method of propagating His message (Mt. 4:17). The center of the Apostles' ministry was also preaching. On the day of Pentecost, Peter stood and preached (Acts 2:14). At the Portico of Solomon, Peter again preached (Acts 3:11). When the work of the ministry burdened the Apostles, they had the church select deacons to carry out the welfare of church, while they devoted themselves to "prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:2-4). And so goes the period of John the Baptist through the Apostles, with preaching at the center.

Subsequent church history also bears out the primacy and centrality of preaching throughout the ages. However, with the emergence of Catholicism, also came the emergence of sacramentalism and sacerdotalism, which replaced the ministry of the Word. Preaching was recovered with the Franciscans and the Dominicans. "Unless you preach everywhere you go," said Francis, "there is no use to go anywhere to preach."³² "His contemporary, Dominic (1170-1221) laid an even great emphasis upon preaching. Combining

³¹J.S. Baird, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 869.

³²Quoted by John Stott, Between Two Worlds, 22.

personal austerity with evangelistic zeal, he travelled widely in the cause of the gospel."³³

Moving closer to the Reformation, John Wycliffe not only translated the Bible into English, he preached it also, with equal fervor. Another early reformer, Savonarola (1452-98) "rose to a position of power through his preaching... and became a hero to many of the early Protestants even though he retained a Catholic theology."³⁴ And finally, Luther and Calvin epitomized the preaching of God's Word. "The Reformation gave centrality to the sermon. The pulpit was higher than the altar, for Luther held that salvation is through the Word."³⁵ Ronald S. Wallace summarizes Calvin's perspective on the ministry of the Word, when he states:

By the preaching of the Word, Christ not only calls, and holds His Church together, He also exercises His rule over the hearts and minds of His people. Whereas David ruled over his earthly kingdom by a golden scepter, Christ's heavenly kingdom is presided over by the scepter of the preached gospel.³⁶

The Reformed tradition, with its rightful emphasis upon the preaching of the Word, gave rise to such great preachers as John Knox of Scotland, the Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritans, such as Owen, Manton, Watson, Baxter, Brooks, Burroughs, and others, as well as Whitefield, Edwards, the Tennents, Rowland,

³³ibid.

³⁴Tim Dowely, editor, Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity (Eerdmans, 1977), 334.

³⁵Roland Bainton, Here I Stand A Life of Martin Luther (Abingdon Press, 1950), 272.

³⁶Ronald S. Wallace, Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation (Baker Bookhouse and Scottish Academic Press, 1988 and 1990), 132-133.

Harris, the Erskine brothers, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, John Brown, and within the last 150 years, Spurgeon and Lloyd-Jones. Outside of the Reformed tradition, great preachers have also abounded, with such examples as the Wesleys, Finney, Moody, and Graham. Wherever God has had dealings with man, He has Divinely appointed preaching as a means to His ends. As this brief survey has demonstrated, preaching is at the center of God's activity, and has held the place of prominence throughout the ages.

THE ESSENCE OF PREACHING

"What is preaching?" If we are to recover it, we must know what it is. To put it simply, preaching is the proclamation of the Word, through a man, by the Spirit, which elicits the appropriate response from the listeners.

The main word used in the New Testament for preaching is kerusso. This word, according to Nida and Louw, means, "To announce in a formal or official manner by means of a herald or one who functions as a herald."³⁷ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich are clear in stating that kerusso is the proclamation of preachers, who act as a herald.³⁸ Thus, to proclaim is to verbally announce in a public setting, and this meaning cannot be stripped from the concept of preaching.

³⁷Louw and Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, 2 Volumes (United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989), vol. 2, 412, #33.206.

³⁸Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (University of Chicago Press, 1957) 432.

The content of the proclamation must be the Word of God alone. Of course, there is proclamation about politics and social issues, but if preaching is to be defined from a Christian perspective, it must be biblical in its content. R.B. Kuiper states, "What must be stated unequivocally in any definition of preaching is that it is proclamation of truth revealed in Holy Scripture, the supernaturally inspired Word of God."³⁹ This type of preaching, broadly defined, is expository preaching. "Exposition is not so much defined by the form of the message as it is by the source and process through which the message was formed."⁴⁰ Haddon Robinson is helpful in his well known definition:

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.⁴¹

Herein lies the authority of the preacher. There is no inherent authority in any office, although the leadership should be respected and treated with dignity (Heb. 13:17; 1 Tim. 5:17), the source of authority comes from the Word of God alone. Robinson rightly warns, "When a preacher fails to preach the Scriptures, he abandons his authority."⁴² The Bible is "God-breathed"

³⁹Ned Stonehouse, ed., The Infallible Word, A Symposium By the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary (Presbyterian Guardian, 1946), 209.

⁴⁰Richard Mayhue, Rediscovering Expository Preaching, John F. MacArthur and the Master's Seminary Faculty (Word, 1992), 11.

⁴¹Haddon Robinson, Biblical Preaching (Baker, 1980), 20.

⁴²Robinson, 18.

(Theopneustos, 2 Tim. 3:16), thus it possesses the very authority of the Sovereign who authored it. Therefore, preaching is authoritative only when it is based on the Word.

This authoritative proclamation of the Word (i.e., expository or biblical preaching) is accomplished through human agency, namely, the preacher. The kerygma comes through the keryx. "His (the herald) task, like the town crier of more recent days, was to make official public proclamations. He needed a strong voice and sometimes used a trumpet. Moreover, it was essential that the herald be a man of considerable self-control. The proclamation must be delivered exactly as it was received. As the mouthpiece of his master he dare not add his own interpretation."⁴³ This is what the Apostles were (1 Tim. 2:7), and it is also what all others are who stand in their shoes and proclaim their doctrine.

It must not be forgotten, that the method (proclamation) and the message (the Word) and the messenger are lifeless and ineffective if they are without the accompanying power of the Holy Spirit. Paul could say to the Thessalonians, "Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5). To the Corinthians he could say, "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and power" (1 Cor. 2:4). It is when these four elements are operative that preaching is truly "the utterances of God (1 Pet. 4:11; 1 Thess. 2:13).

⁴³John R.W. Stott, The Preacher's Portrait (Eerdmans, 1961), 37.

Spurgeon sums up the vital necessity of the Spirit's ministry when he says,

To us, as ministers, the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential. Without Him our office is a mere name. We claim no priesthood over and above that which belongs to every child of God; but we are the successors of those who, in olden times, were moved of God to declare His Word, to testify against transgression, and to lead His cause. Unless we have the Spirit of the prophets resting upon us, the mantle which we wear is nothing but a rough garment to deceive. We ought to be driven forth with abhorrence from the society of honest men for daring to speak in the name of the Lord if the Spirit of God rests not upon us.⁴⁴

This type of Spirit-empowered preaching will elicit the appropriate worshipful response from its hearers. This was the case at Pentecost, with repentance being the response (Acts 2:37).⁴⁵ Some have argued that preaching is one-sided, a performance with the preacher as the actor and the congregation as the audience. However, genuine preaching is an act of worship, for both preacher and congregation. Biblical preaching is mutual worship in that it is transactional, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has testified, "There is unity between preacher and hearers and there is transaction backwards and forwards. That, to me, is true preaching."⁴⁶

This two-way communication is worship. God communicates with His people, and they respond. "The preaching of the Bible is the

⁴⁴Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Lectures to My Students (Zondervan, 1954) 186-187.

⁴⁵I am also aware that sometimes the Word preached elicits negative response, as with Stephen's sermon in Acts 7.

⁴⁶D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Knowing the Times (Banner of Truth, 1989), 273.

mainspring of this worship, for it fuels the devotional fire, constantly confronting Christians with God's works and way in saving them and thereby leads them into paths of obedient and adoring response."⁴⁷ Packer goes on to note, "congregations never honor God more than by reverently listening to His Word with a full purpose of praising and obeying Him once they see what He has done and is doing, and what they are called to do."⁴⁸ Those who bifurcate preaching from worship fail to see that actively listening to the God who speaks, with a view to obedience and adoration, is the greatest act of worship one can render to the Almighty God.

Soren Kierkegaard rightly corrects the notion that the preacher is an actor and the congregation passively observes, when he says,

In the most earnest sense, God is the critical theatergoer, who looks on to see how the lines are spoken and how they are listened to: hence here the customary audience is wanting. The speaker (i.e. the preacher) is then the prompter, and the listener (i.e. the congregant) stands openly before God. The listener, if I may say so, is the actor, who in all truth acts before God.⁴⁹

Preaching, then, is the proclamation of the Word, through a man, by the Spirit, which elicits an appropriate response from the congregation. Therefore, it is right to say that preaching is the hub, the centerpiece of the worship of the church. For in

⁴⁷J.I. Packer, The Preacher and Preaching, edited by Samuel Logan (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 20.

⁴⁸ibid.

⁴⁹Soren Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing (Harper Torchbooks, Harper edition, 1956), 181.

preaching, God speaks and His people respond with reverential obedience. This is the essence of true preaching.

THE MANDATE TO PREACH

2 Timothy 3:16-4:2

All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

I solemnly charge you before God and of Christ, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and Kingdom: PREACH THE WORD; be ready when its timely and untimely; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all patience and teaching.

This text, of all mandate texts, is highly significant because of its connection with the doctrine of inspiration, which immediately precedes it. Paul's thoughts are linked together here, and it is no accident that the Scriptures which are God-breathed and profitable, are also the Scriptures which are to be preached. Calvin, picking up on this connections, says, "But when Paul speaks of the usefulness of the Scripture, he concludes not only that everyone should read it, but that teachers ought to administer it, which is the duty laid upon them."⁵⁰

This charge (diamarturomai) is an exceedingly grave and sober one. Paul reminds Timothy that this adjuration is given in the presence of God and Christ. And to intensify it to the highest degree, he adds "who is coming to judge living and dead, and His appearing (epiphaneia) and kingdom." Because the Word is God-

⁵⁰John Calvin, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 10, translated by T.A. Smail (Eerdmans, 1964), 332.

breathed, the charge to preach it carries a solemnity that will only be fully revealed in that Great Day. The herald will have to face the Author of the message he proclaimed, and all things will be laid bare.

The charge itself is "preach the Word." Keruxon is an aorist imperative,⁵¹ and sets the tone for the other imperatives that follow. The significance of this command cannot be underestimated. Timothy (and all who follow him in ministry) is to "preach." "The rendering "preach the Word" is entirely correct, if the verb "preach" be understood in its primary, etymological meaning: to proclaim before the public, and not in the weakened sense which today is often attached to it: to deliver a moral or religious discourse of any kind and in any way." ⁵²

The content of the preaching is "the Word" (ton logon). This reference to the Word is probably a summation of God's revelation en toto. Just as Paul proclaimed the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), so Timothy was to preach the whole counsel of God. The Word and the Word alone was to comprise Timothy's message. "He is not to give the people stones instead of bread, by publishing his own opinions or delivering lecture in philosophy! His task as a

⁵¹The aorist tense presents no problem in terms of Aktionsart, if we do not fall into the exegetical fallacy of equating aorist with "once for all" action. In Koine there is little or no difference between the present or aorist imperative, "The Aorist grammaticalizes reference to the process as a whole, and thus appropriate for an extended length of time" (Porter, Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with Reference to Mood and Tense. [Lang, 1989], 354.)

⁵²William Hendricksen, New Testament Commentary I-II Timothy and Titus (Baker, first printing 1957, eighth 1978), 309.

herald of God's grace means that he must preach the Word, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word."⁵³

Herein lies the mandate of the ministry- PREACH THE WORD! This apostolic injunction, given by inspiration, cannot be ignored. Although other methods may crowd out preaching, in favor of more palatable measures, the church which seeks to honor and obey God must preach the Word. Certainly the church can use drama, music, and other mediums to help disseminate God's truth, but if it abandons preaching the Word, then it abandons God's divinely appointed means of declaring His Word. And it is at this very point that the method of preaching and the power of preaching come together.

THE POWER OF PREACHING

In 1 Corinthians 1-2 Paul lays before us why preaching is the divinely appointed means of declaring the gospel, and why it has explosive, dynamic power. If history testifies to the centrality and efficacy of preaching, and God demands that we preach the Word, there must be a reason. That reason is summed up in this passage.

Paul's thrust in this passage is two-fold: preaching is stupid and preaching demonstrates the power of God. As one reads this text, it is crystal clear that the message and the method are inextricably linked together. In 1:21 Paul uses kerugma, "that which is preached or proclaimed," in 1:23 he states, "kerussomen

⁵³Geoffrey Wilson, The Pastoral Epistles (Banner of Truth, 1982), 160.

Christ crucified," and in 2:4, Paul speaks of his "ho logos kai to kerugma." The message and the preaching are bound up in one another.

Therefore, Paul states that his preaching (method and message) is foolishness. In 1:18, 21, 23, 27, and 2:4 preaching is called "foolishness" (moria). In 1:23 preaching is both a skandalon and morian. In 1:27 it is "weak," in 1:28 it is "base," and "despised." This first thrust of Paul's is crucial in his argument, for he plays the stupidity of preaching over and against the sophia of men.

Paul had everything that we have (with the exception of electronic media) at his disposal. He had drama, for the Greco-Roman culture was replete with acting talent. Certainly some of those in the theater were converted, and Paul no doubt could have used them. In fact, Paul had access to something that we know little about in our day, and that is ancient rhetoric, the art of human persuasion. In terms of effectiveness, it would put most every form of medium we have today to shame. When Paul uses sophia, he is speaking of the rhetoricians who would entertain an audience by their oratorical skills, displaying their "wisdom" (sophia). Calvin insightfully writes, "When he says 'the persuasive words of human wisdom' Paul means choice oratory, which strives and exerts itself with artifice rather than truth; and at the same time he means the appearance of acuteness, which attracts

the minds of men."⁵⁴

Litfin states, concerning rhetoric,

Secular theories of persuasion have always been designed to enable men to influence their fellow men more effectively; that is, they are avowedly instrumental, utilitarian, or goal-oriented. Responsible rhetoricians have seldom condoned sophistry or casuistry, of course, but their efforts have been frankly directed toward drawing forth particular decisions, attitudes, or behavior.⁵⁵

It is this very thing that Paul disavows and decries. He repudiates any use of the most effective method of persuasion available, for the simple reason that "your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (2:5). For Paul, preaching was not only stupid, but it was also the very thing God demonstrated His power through. In 1:18, preaching is "the power of God," in 1:24 it is the "wisdom and power of God," and in 2:4 it is "in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power." Paul's argument is simple, preaching (i.e., mere proclamation) is moronic, base, crude, crass, unsophisticated, and ineffective, therefore, when God saves someone through the foolishness of the message preached there is no doubt as to Who brought about the results, and to Whom the glory and credit belong (1:26-31).

The minute we rely upon the secular methods of effective marketing-result techniques, we factor into the equation our own wisdom and we abandon the power of God. Our job is to herald a

⁵⁴Calvin, Vol. 9, pg. 51. This view of sophia has been corroborated by Duane Litfin, "Theological Presuppositions and Preaching: An Evangelical Perspective" (Ph.D. dissertation, Purdue University, 1973).

⁵⁵Duane Litfin, "The Perils of Persuasion," Christianity Today 21 (Feb. 1977): 15.

message, a silly message, and to watch our God bring about the results. To be sure, we use homiletical form, and we are animated and interesting, but what we should be divorced from are the techniques that elicit responses based on anything other than the mere proclamation of the message.⁵⁶

Paul obviously understood that 'persuasive words of wisdom,' so highly prized in the rhetorically oriented Corinthian culture, could never bring men and women to Christ. Only the straightforward presentation of the Gospel could do that. The use of persuasion techniques might indeed win a response, but it would be a response based upon the 'wisdom of men' and not 'the power of God.' Paul had the insight to see that such results would inevitably 'make void' the very Gospel he preached.⁵⁷

It is in the very context of weakness and apparent ineffectiveness that God demonstrates His power through the message preached. This is why history bears out the centrality and efficacy of the Word preached. This is why God has mandated in His Word to preach His Word. And this is why substitutes for preaching are wrong, for they undermine the very method God has chosen to magnify His name and reveal His sovereign grace through His Son.

CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

The church is drifting away from preaching, some areas of the church are drifting faster than others, it all depends on how strong the various currents may be. Other methods, deemed more

⁵⁶It is understood that drawing lines at this point is difficult, however, just because there is some ambiguity within the practical application of the principle does not negate the veracity of the principle and the necessity of making an honest effort in abiding by it.

⁵⁷Duane Litfin, CT, 16.

acceptable and effective, are being advocated from all corners. There is no doubt that there is a dearth of sound, powerful preaching today. However, the Christian church stands on a strong heritage of preaching, it cannot be denied. The very essence of preaching should compel us to be dissatisfied with where we are at, and strive for better preaching. The divine mandate to preach ought to keep us on track and prompt us to honor God by honoring and obeying His mandate. And the power of preaching ought to make us rejoice in the power of God, and to hunger for that solemn, fervent, Spirit-empowered preaching that Paul talked about.

What desperately needs to be recovered today is the solemnity and gravity of biblical preaching. What needs to be emphasized in our narcissistic culture is Isaiah 66:2: "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My Word." John Piper accurately criticizes our culture when he says,

If you endeavor to bring a holy hush upon people in a worship service, you can be assured that someone will say that the atmosphere is unfriendly or cold. All that many people can imagine is that the absence of chatter would mean the presence of stiff, awkward unfriendliness. Since they have little or no experience with deep gladness of momentous gravity, they strive for gladness the only way they know- by being lighthearted, chipper, and talkative. Pastors have absorbed this narrow view of gladness and friendliness and now cultivate it across the land with pulpit demeanor and verbal casualness that makes the blood-earnestness of Chalmers and the pervading solemnity of Edwards' mind unthinkable. The result is a preaching atmosphere and style plagued by triviality, levity, carelessness, flippancy, and a general spirit that nothing of eternal and infinite proportions is being done or said on

Sunday morning.⁵⁸

In conclusion, I would like to offer a few reflective thoughts on how to see a revival of powerful preaching, which would result in an awakening in our churches and land.

1. **Meditate** on the Word, focusing on what it is, Whose Word it is, its inherent power, and the awesome responsibility of proclaiming it.
2. **Pray** for unction and power, in the study and pulpit, so that God would demonstrate His power and glory in those who hear His Word.
3. **Teach** the people that biblical preaching is the voice of God, and it must be responded to in adoration and obedience. Teach them to expect to hear from God, and then do not block the process.
4. **Cultivate** a solemnity in worship through preaching, as well as music and singing. Help people realize that "God is certainly among us" (1 Cor. 14:25). Have a reflection/meditation time after the message, instead of immediately chatting about the football games, etc.
5. **Learn** to allow the zeal for God's glory to be the motivating factor in preaching and ministry in general.

"TO HIM BE THE GLORY IN THE CHURCH"

⁵⁸John Piper, The Supremacy of God in Preaching (Baker, 1990), 51-52.

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