

PREACHING

When Jesus speaks today

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I have to acknowledge how helpful I have always found Stuart Olyott's teaching on preaching and that some of his headings appear in chapter 5.

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1: Introduction

From the New Testament data, preaching may be generally defined as the public proclamation of the message of God by a man commissioned to the task, Romans 10.14, 15.

We find in Scripture that the primary command given to church ministers is to 'preach the word,' 2 Timothy 4.2; Titus 1.9; Mark 16.15. This can be either in an evangelistic setting Matthew 4.17, or among believers, Romans 1.15. Of course, this is to be engaged in prayerfully, Acts 6.4, and with much love, 1 Corinthians 13.1-3. But the preacher's main purpose is to understand and to voice the message of God as it is taught in the Bible.

In today's visual culture of YouTube, digital technology, the emoji and film, this might seem out of place. The idea of a man simply speaking to a group of his fellow men and women is viewed as unexciting. It will not capture people's attention, we are told. And, it is said, if we are too wedded to preaching, people will perceive the church as boring and irrelevant.

Nevertheless, we find that the idea of God's word being preached – as opposed to being painted on a canvass or acted out on a stage or a film set etc – runs throughout the Bible. People need to *hear* the word of God and preachers need to be sent by God so that they can hear it, Romans 10.14. It is true that sometimes the Old Testament prophets – Ezekiel especially springs to mind – used visual aids or dramatic actions. But those were not the main event. They were secondary. They had to be interpreted. They acted simply as helps and supports to the verbal communication of God's truth.

Idolatry and creation

God knows that, in a fallen world, what is visual can quickly be turned into an idol. One thinks of what happened in subsequent years to the brass serpent on a pole, which Moses was initially commanded to set up to encourage faith, 2 Kings 18.4. It came to be an object of worship and proved a snare to God's people. The visual tends to lead us to worship the creature rather than the invisible Creator, Romans 1.25.

The truth is that God's word is more fundamental than any visual image. This is because all of creation, all that we see with our eyes, is derivative. It was created by God's word. It is sustained by God's word. When God *spoke*, the world came into being. The word came first. 'By faith we understand that the universe was

formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible,' Hebrews 11.3. People need to hear God speak again today and he does this, as we shall see, through his preachers.

It is God's word that has power to create. People need to *hear* the word of the Lord. Sinners are born again through the living and enduring word of God, 1 Peter 1.23. Dry bones can live when the word of God is spoken in the power of the Spirit, Ezekiel 37.3. The dead rise as they hear the command of Christ the King, John 11.43, 44. God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', makes the light of Christ shine in our hearts, as his word is proclaimed, 2 Corinthians 4.6.

So it is that preaching by Spirit-anointed, called men must be central to the church and its mission. In this booklet we try to explain this truth, to defend it from being despised or dispensed with and to explore its mighty potential for the furtherance of God's kingdom on earth.

2. Preaching: its divine material

If God is not the centre of our lives then self will be. And since the Fall, the self is sinful. With the rise of a tacit atheism during the last 100 years, we have seen exactly such a self-focused culture emerge, especially in the Western world. It is not for nothing that the advent of digital technology has given rise to the 'Selfie' – we love making images of ourselves.

In 2 Timothy 3.1-5, the apostle Paul foresees periods in the Last Days in which people are enthralled to 'self.' 'People will be lovers of themselves,' v2. They will be 'lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,' v4. Human beings will be taken up as never before with a 'feel good' approach to life, Ephesians 4.17-19, and 'feeling positive' about themselves.

These will be 'terrible times' for Christians, v1. But it is in precisely this setting that Paul insists that the Church and its teachers must not be moved from the Scriptures, 2 Timothy 3.14-17.

The truth versus myths

Human beings have to have a story to tell themselves about their lives. The story we tell ourselves about ourselves gives us a certain significance, at least in our own eyes.

The fundamental issue in such 'terrible times' concerns truth. The reality in which we live our lives belongs to God our Creator, Sustainer, Judge and Saviour. It is in him that we live and move and have our being, Acts 17.28, and his gospel, based in the historical facts concerning his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the truth and the key to all that is objective and actual.

But the truth is often uncomfortable for a 'feel good' society. It is not, at least initially, a happy story for people to tell themselves, but a tragedy in which redemption is urgently required. The truth will therefore be opposed, 2 Timothy 3.8. People would rather listen to myths, with no basis in fact, so long as they affirm them and uplift them emotionally, 2 Timothy 4.3-4. The Church will be under pressure to depart from the Bible. When the West began to disown a Christian view of life in the late 19th and early 20th century, people turned to Freud to try to understand themselves and their problems. His theories were based on the ancient Greek myths. Today pop psychology rules, founded on the unprovable but comforting premise that we are all 'special' in some way.

By contrast, the gospel which we preach is concerned with facts. It is rooted in eye-witness accounts of life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Luke 1.1-4; John 20.30,31.

God's word

However, not only is the gospel truth rather than fiction, the ultimate reason the Church is to cling to Scripture is because it is the word of God. Though it came to us via human agency, it is breathed out, word for word, by God himself, 2 Timothy 3.16; 2 Peter 1.21. Thus, rather than the ephemeral, often erroneous, culture-bound ideas of man, we preach the flawless word of the eternal God, 2 Timothy 4.2. The preacher explains and expounds Scripture – the divine material of sermons.

We are to 'preach the word', 2 Timothy 4.2. In 2 Timothy 3, Paul gives at least three reasons why the Church must stick to the Bible and its preachers should proclaim the Bible's message.

First, because Bible truth transforms lives, 2 Timothy 3.14. It is a living word through which sinners are born again of God's Spirit, 1 Peter 1.23; Hebrews 4.12. It has power.

Second, because the Bible makes clear the only way of salvation, 2 Timothy 3.15. The Bible unfolds the whole plan of salvation centred on the Lord Jesus, and the Old Testament's many fulfilled prophecies concerning the Son of God are just part of the evidence that Scripture really is not from man, but is God's word.

Third, because the Bible equips Christian teachers to address every situation God's people may face. Just as the OT prophet ('man of God') had access to the council chamber of God, so prayerful, obedient preachers who immerse themselves in Scripture are given God's message for today, 2 Timothy 3.17.

3. Preaching: its inherent significance

Why do we believe in the primacy of preaching rather than, say, sharing God's word in discussion or a question and answer session? Don't these activities get truth across to people? Of course, there is a place for such things, but nevertheless in the early church, the public proclamation of God's word had pride of place. Why is that?

The answer lies, not in the culture of the first century world, but in the fact that the mode of communication has some vital things to say about what we are communicating. In the well-known phrase of 1960s communication guru Marshall McLuhan, 'the medium is the message.'

The medium of preaching speaks of at least two essential gospel truths.

Christologically

Preaching tells us that Jesus is Lord.

The fundamental confession of the Christian Church is that, having died for our sins and risen from the dead in victory over sin and Satan, Jesus Christ is ascended into heaven and reigns as Lord of all, Matthew 28.18-20; Acts 2.36; 1 Corinthians 12.3; Philippians 2.9-11.

Christ's word is not, therefore, ultimately up for discussion or open to opinion. It is to be declared, heard and obeyed. He is Lord! The preacher is nothing less than a commissioned herald who brings the word of the King. We have been brought into a kingdom, not a democracy.

So we find in Scripture that the true preacher...

Is sent by God, Romans 10.14,15

Is an ambassador of Christ, 2 Corinthians 5.20

Is one through whom Jesus himself speaks, Ephesians 2.17; Romans 10.14

Is one who conveys the message of God, 1 Thessalonians 2.13

It is declaration / proclamation which is congruent, or fits with, who Jesus really is – Lord of all. The preacher announces the commands of the Sovereign.

Soteriologically

Preaching speaks of the finished work of Christ and the freeness of our salvation.

Commenting on Romans 10.6-8, Jonathan Griffiths puts it like this in his study *Preaching in the New Testament*¹: ‘...the gospel does not require strenuous effort...(People) do not need to reach up to heaven or down into the abyss to take hold of Christ, because he has already descended to earth and been raised from the dead. That is to say, all that is needed to achieve salvation has been done already...All that is required now is a believing response to the proclaimed word, Romans 10.9-11.

He continues: ‘Here Paul shows that the dissemination of the gospel message through preaching reflects the very nature of the gospel as something given by God and received by humanity – in particular, *as something spoken to be heard*. Humanity does not need to seek out salvation, but the word of faith is near at hand through the preaching of the gospel, Romans 10.8, so that those in need of salvation need only hear, believe and confess.’

So preaching itself indicates that Jesus is Lord and that salvation is free by faith.

Putting these two elements of the message inherent in Christian preaching together, we see that the preacher should be characterized by a humble and benevolent authority. There is an authority because he preaches the message of King Jesus. There is a humility, because he serves not himself but the king and is answerable to him. There is a benevolence, because Christ loves sinners and at the great cost of his own blood offers salvation freely to all through the preacher.

1. Jonathan I Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament: An exegetical biblical-theological study*, Apollos, IVP, 2017, page 68

4. Preaching - its momentous nature

How people respond to the word of God is the great divider of the human race. It is a matter of life and death – eternally.

Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount by repeatedly emphasizing that ultimately there are only two ways from which to choose – to life or to destruction, and it is the response to his word which determines which path people are on, Matthew 7.24-27.

In John's Gospel the same truth is put like this: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him,' John 3.36. Or again, 'I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life; he has crossed over from death to life,' John 5.24.

See also Acts 4.12; 2 Corinthians 2.15,16; 1 John 4.6 etc.

- 'There is not a sermon that is heard, but it sets us nearer heaven or hell,' (John Preston 1587- 1628)

A serious calling

Preachers are those who are vehicles for the word of God, who voice the message of the gospel to others. As people respond to our message eternal destinies are being set in place, either for ultimate joy or everlasting sorrow, Acts 2.40; 1 Thessalonians 1.9, 10.

Another way of looking at it is that, as the gospel is proclaimed by the preacher, God's eternal decrees of election and of reprobation are being brought to pass, Acts 13.48; 1 Thessalonians 5.9.

This means that preachers must take their calling very seriously. While it is right that there is to be a certain humanity in our preaching, and something of our own joy in Christ should be evident as we preach (after all God has saved *us*), nevertheless we are not in the pulpit to entertain our hearers, Ezekiel 33.30-33. We are not there to gain their approval but to convey vital truth.

- 'The Word of God is too sacred a thing, and preaching too solemn a work, to be toyed and played with,' (William Gurnall 1616 – 1679).

- ‘Remember they must be awakened or damned. And a sleepy preacher will hardly awaken them... Speak to your people as to people who must be awakened either here or in hell,’ Richard Baxter (1615 – 1691).

Dignity

In the present cultural climate, preachers are generally despised. We are portrayed in the media either as stupid *Dad’s Army* vicars or dangerous fanatics akin to Islamist terrorists. We must be careful that we do not allow ourselves to be influenced by such bad press. We are to love people but at the same time see that we have a job to do which could not be more important.

Superficial Christians in our churches may even buy into such caricatures of preachers, making jokes about our calling at our expense. We need to gently but firmly rebuff such things. Paul told young Timothy not to let anyone look down on him, 1 Timothy 4.12. It would do no good either to Timothy or his congregation.

We stand in the place of Christ remonstrating with people.

- ‘To see a prince entreat a beggar to receive alms would be a strange sight; to see a king entreat a traitor to accept of mercy would be a stranger sight than that; but to see God entreat a sinner, to hear Christ say, “I stand at the door and knock,” with a full heart and a heaven full of grace to bestow upon him that opens, this is such a sight as dazzles the eyes of angels’ (John Bunyan 1628 – 1688).

5. Preaching - its vital ingredients

Not all preaching has to be the exposition of a single Bible passage. There is nothing wrong with that way of preaching but you will not find an example of it in the Bible. The book of Hebrews, for example, may be regarded as a sermon, Hebrews 13.22, but it is very unlike most preaching in churches today. We can afford to be more flexible. So what makes a good sermon?

1. Prayerful preparation

Anything that is of spiritual worth is born in prayer. Our messages need not just to be academically accurate but to have the touch of heaven upon them, Colossians 4.3,4.

2. Arresting introduction

In a busy world people's minds are often distracted. Grab their attention. Start where they are and lead them to God. Note arresting introductions in Scripture, Matthew 5.3; 2 Samuel 12.1-5.

3. Exegetical accuracy

We must convey the truth that our text is meant to convey – not reading our own ideas into it. The crucial areas are grammar; context; genre; redemptive history. We should legitimately find the Lord Jesus Christ in all the Scriptures. Luke 24.27; John 5.39; Acts 11.26; 2 Timothy 3.15.

4. Doctrinal substance

The key to personal transformation is the mind, Romans 12.2. Therefore our explanation of Scripture must convey, not just stories, but definite Bible truths – the counsel of God, Acts 20.27 – which shapes discernment and godliness. Mindless Christianity tends to be spineless Christianity.

5. Clear structure

Generally people can grasp a message and retain it better if they can see a clear structure behind what is being said. Can you see, for example, a structure in Peter's Acts 2 sermon?

6. Vivid illustration

Illustrations act like windows into truth. They can grab the imagination and enable listeners to see the potential of the truth. They underline truth and so help people to hold on to it. This is also the place (sometimes and humbly) for the preacher's personal experience. Paul mentions his own experience in his

letters. People need to know that this Christianity works in practice.

7. Reasoned argument

Rationality is a part of God's image in us. Reasonable people need a reasonable faith. Bring apologetics and the force of logic into preaching (without becoming convoluted), Acts 6.9,10; 9.22.

8. Spiritual urgency

We are not lecturers. We are preachers. We have a life or death message. We need fire as well as light. Preaching should have a certain passion about it, John 5.35.

9. Pointed application

Our hearers need conviction of sin, John 16.8, and to know what to do in the light of the message. Note, different people require different applications, 1 Thessalonians 5.14; 2 Timothy 3.16,17.

10. Decisive conclusion

Our messages must not peter out. We are bringing God's word! They should terminate with a definite challenge or consolation, Acts 2.36, 38; Matthew 7.24-27.

6. Preaching - its almighty facilitator

Corrie Ten Boom relates a story of a woodpecker which is instructive for preachers. One day a woodpecker was pecking a tree (as they do) and just as he was hammering away with his beak against the wood, a storm blew in and the tree was struck by a lightning bolt. The bird managed to fly away just in time but the tree was destroyed. 'Wow,' said the other animals who had been watching, 'what kind of power does that woodpecker have in his beak!' They, of course, were totally mistaken.

Just so, power in preaching does not reside in the preacher himself, but in the work of the Spirit.

The Spirit's power

The NT writers are quite clear that it is not the preacher, but the power of God, the Holy Spirit, who makes preaching effective to the saving of sinners and the building up of God's people.

Jesus explained that it is by the Spirit that sinners would be convicted and see their need: 'When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned,' John 16.8-11.

This work of the Spirit in conjunction with the preaching of the gospel is indicated throughout the NT, Acts 2.37; 1 Corinthians 2.4; 1 Thessalonians 1.4-5; 1 Peter 1.12.

Filled with the Spirit

Though the Spirit may work despite the preacher, (cf. John 11.49-52) normally he works in conjunction with a preacher who is filled with the Spirit.

It was in the power of the Spirit that the Lord Jesus carried out his teaching and preaching ministry, Luke 4.14,15. Peter was filled with the Spirit when he preached at Pentecost, Acts 2.4, and when he witnessed for Christ before the Sanhedrin, Acts 4.8. In answer to the church's prayer, bold preaching resulted as they were filled with the Spirit, Acts 4.31. Stephen, full of faith and of the Holy

Spirit, Acts 6.5, was a preacher of unanswerable reasoning and power, Acts 6.10. The apostle Paul was filled with the Spirit at the commencement of his ministry and subsequently, Acts 9.17; 13.9.

The ongoing command to all God's people who would serve him effectively is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 5.18.

Prayer for the Spirit

We are not to neglect thorough Bible study and careful preparation of our messages, but we must grasp the fact that it is not these things which will ultimately make sermons effective. The Holy Spirit is given in answer to prayers from thirsty, believing, hearts, John 7.37-39.

- The preacher must humbly pray over his messages, Mark 1.35-39.
- The church should pray for its preachers, Acts 4.29-31.

It is arguable that the 'greater works' which the Lord Jesus referred to in John 14.12, relate to numbers of souls being saved under the preaching of the gospel. At the end of his ministry, the Lord Jesus Christ had just 120 disciples it seems, Acts 1.15. But at Pentecost, as the church had prayed, 3000 people were saved as the poured-out Holy Spirit was at work, Acts 2.41.

- 'Some ministers of fewer gifts are more successful than some far above them in abilities; not because they preach better, so much as because they pray more. ' (Robert Traill 1642 – 1716)

7. Preaching - its ongoing vision

If we are called to a church as the pastor, we will need to teach God's word to largely the same people every Sunday for many years. How are we to maintain that in a way that is helpful? Here are five matters to constantly bear in mind.

Our target is the heart

We preach in order to see our hearers transformed for Christ. Therefore, the constant target of our preaching must be the 'control centre' of every human being, which is the inner person or 'heart' of those who listen, Romans 6.17. Whether we are preaching to non-Christians or Christians we are always looking for preaching to bring repentance and faith. This means...

We must address the mind with clarity, 2 Corinthians 10.5

We must confront the conscience with light, Ephesians 5.11

We must woo the affections with warmth, Philippians 1.7, 8

Our desire is a mature church

Preaching and teaching is not an end in itself. What are we seeking? We are seeking to build a mature church through the conversion of sinners and for the church to grow both numerically and in Christian maturity to the glory of God.

Therefore we need to have a clear understanding of what a vibrant church looks like. There are a number of passages in Acts which show us what a church can be, Acts 2.42-47; 4.32-37; 5.12-16. In particular, the church at Antioch provides a fine model 11.19-30 and 12.1-3.

Our curriculum is the whole Bible

God has given us the whole of Scripture because we need the whole of Scripture, Matthew 4.4; Acts 20.27; 2 Timothy 3.14-17.

In particular our people need to be well grounded in the Old Testament as well as in the New. Without the OT background people will not properly grasp the meaning of the NT.

There is a place for both the systematic exposition of Bible books, and the preaching of what God's word as whole has to say on particular topics. The

historic Confessions of Faith, which seek to summarize the teaching of the whole of Scripture, should not be neglected. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds, Romans 12.2. We need to help our people to develop a Christian mind in order to live godly lives in a challenging world.

Our audience is the diverse congregation

Our congregations will be made up of a varied group of people. They will differ not only in age and gender, but also in social class, ethnic background and personal weaknesses and strengths. Who are those who regularly listen to you preach? John 21.15-17; 10.16.

This is one reason why a proper preaching ministry will stand alongside visiting people and getting to know them as a shepherd knows his sheep, Proverbs 27.23 – 27.

Try to apply the gospel to where people are as individuals, 1 Thessalonians 5.14.

Our context is the changing times

We listen to Scripture and we pay attention to people's needs and to the world, to know how to counter its lies and to promote the gospel.

Society itself changes, 2 Timothy 3.1-5. In the last century we have seen the growth of permissiveness, the consumer society, therapy culture and the cult of celebrity.

Then there will always be tragedies impacting our world, on which people need to hear God's word speak, Luke 13.1-9.

In a changing world people need to hear the unchanging God speak into their lives.

8. Preaching - its distinctive call

If you are a Christian, you have not only been called out of darkness into the light of Christ, but you are also called to ministry, to service of one sort or another.

When it comes to the call to be a preacher we must be guided by Scripture. We are told there that the ascended Christ has given gifts to his people for the building up of his church, Ephesians 4.7-13. The question then is this: what has God put in your power to do in his service? Having spoken of responding to God's grace in the gospel by being living sacrifices, Romans 12.1, the apostle Paul goes on to encourage the Romans to consider their spiritual gifts, Romans 12.3-8. His thrust in those verses is that whatever gift we have, we must use in Christ's service. What we *can* do, we *should* do.

Personal gifting

'We have different gifts, according to the grace given us,' Romans 12.6. If Christ has truly gifted you as a preacher, then he is calling you to be a preacher.

Has the Lord gifted you with an ability to understand his word and to explain it in a clear way which exalts Christ and edifies others? This question must be considered, and the context of Romans 12 gives us clear indications as to how it must be considered.

Consider it as a living sacrifice, v1. Sadly, it is possible to be gifted by God, but not wish to face the implications of using that gift to the full. Many wish to view preaching as almost a hobby which they exercise alongside a secular calling which is more financially secure. We can quench the work of the Spirit, 1 Thessalonians 5.19.

Consider it with a renewed mind, v2. The renewed mind does not prize the things which the world prizes. It concerns itself with knowing and doing God's will. It's desire is to please him.

Consider it with a sober attitude, v3. We are to approach a possible call to be a preacher with great humility trusting in God to provide, not out of a confidence in our own abilities, or a concern to make a name for ourselves, 1 Timothy 3.6; 3 John v9.

Consider it with the good of the church uppermost in mind, v4-6. Preaching is not

a performance or for personal pleasure. It is a way of serving God's people. Is that your mindset?

- 'Most often the presence of such gifts of the Spirit creates a desire for their exercise. By them a man is drawn to the Word, to Christ, to men. For this reason a deep and sincere desire to enter the ministry is the commonest evidence of the Lord's calling.' (Edmund Clowney 1917-2005)

Church recognition

However, mere desire on the part of the potential preacher is not a sufficient criterion. We must not simply 'opt to teach', we must be 'apt to teach', 1 Timothy 3.2.

The call to the ministry must be discerned in fellowship with the church. The wisdom of other mature Christians helps us to think soberly about ourselves, Acts 6.3; 13.1-3. A man with a true gift will be an effective preacher. His ministry will bear good fruit, which the church can see.

- The church must be able to recognize a godly life in the potential preacher, 1 Timothy 3.1-7.
- The church must be able to recognize the gifting and ministry he has, Galatians 2.9.

The ascended Lord calls men by the gifts of his Spirit. The preacher is the steward of these gifts. But he is a steward in conjunction with the church which his gift is to serve. The recognition of the church does not bestow the authority; only the gift of Christ can do that. It accepts the authority of Christ speaking through the preacher as a man sent by the Lord, and relates that to the people of God so that the mutual fellowship of gifts facilitate the up-building of Christ's body.

The voice of Christ

'In Romans 10.14 Paul asks the question: 'How shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard?' (*New American Standard Bible*). True we cannot believe unless we have heard *about* Jesus. But Paul implies more than this. 'Him whom they have not heard' implies that in proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Spirit we hear the living voice of Christ (see John 10-3,5, 16). Paul further implies that it is through the preachers the Lord has sent that he speaks himself.

'We need to recover this New Testament teaching and learn to think of the preaching of the Word of God as an aspect of the ongoing work of Christ as Prophet. When hearts and minds are engaged by such preaching, there is a deep consciousness that Christ himself is speaking, indeed "preaching" his Word to us. This, incidentally, is why preachers themselves must "sit under the ministry of the Word" even while they are themselves preaching it so that they can be "preached to" as really and powerfully as any of their hearers.'

Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Ephesians*, Banner of Truth, page 67

