

## PREACHING AS WORSHIP

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The preaching of the Word of God must be central to the worship of the Lord's people. In recent days it has taken a back seat to other elements of worship, and in some cases has been virtually or entirely excluded from "worship" services. One of the significant actions of the reformers was to remove the altar from the church building and to elevate the pulpit to emphasize the centrality of the pure preaching of the Word. This was done according to the example of Nehemiah (Neh. 8:4), where the text indicates that the pulpit he used was elevated (the word is most often translated "tower"). This is not merely a matter of practicality, in allowing all those present to see who is speaking, but it also stresses that the Word of God is of paramount importance in worship.

Why should this be the case? Is this merely a matter of following the example of Nehemiah and the reformers, or is there a more significant reason than this?

### ***The Preaching of the Word is a Means of Grace***

Our first consideration is that the preaching of the Word is a means of grace. Consistent with the Word of God itself, the historical reformed confessions declare this to be so. Paul says that "it is the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16); it is what God uses to effect the salvation of a soul, therefore Paul has no reason to be ashamed of it. David made a similar statement in the Old Testament, declaring that "the law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul" (Psalm 19:7). Further, we are told in Hebrews 4:12 that "the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

But might I not read the Word of God in the quietness of my home and blessing be gained in that way? Does this not give more glory to God in that there is no man to stand in the way, so that I have more direct access to God's truths? After all, do not all have the Spirit of God and the ability, by that Spirit, to interpret and understand the Word?

These are pious sounding words indeed, but they reflect the individualistic tone of our day, and disregard the covenant aspect of sound doctrine. Furthermore, they are uncomfortably close to an attitude that resulted in the destruction of those who dared to voice them in the presence of God's servant (Numbers 16:3). The effects of such an approach are seen in the anarchistic and Arminian tendencies in much of what passes for worship today.

In addition, they reject an important Scriptural doctrine. The Bible declares that "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). It does not make sense to the unbelieving mind that preaching is the vehicle the Lord has chosen in which to

convey his truth. And this unbelief is the very reason why it is set aside in so many worship services. It is suggested that it is impractical and old-fashioned. In some places it is entirely (or almost entirely) replaced by singing (so-called Praise and Worship), in others it is replaced by drama, which has been deemed by many to be a more effective means of communicating God's truth, completely disregarding what God himself has said about preaching.

## **True Preaching**

Thus we can see that the plain instruction of the Word of God itself tells us that the true preaching of God's Word is indispensable to the life and worship of the Church. But it must be true preaching. Today the very idea of *communicating* God's truth has taken the place of simple obedience. It has become very popular to refer to those who discourse on the Word of God as "good communicators." Far be it from us to call them good preachers! Admittedly, many of them **are** better communicators than preachers. The difference is that the truth communicated in true preaching is the communication of the Holy Spirit to the soul, not merely the tickling of ears or the entertaining of the carnal mind.

True preaching does not come with the beliefs or ideas of men. It does not say, "in my opinion;" it always seeks to declare "Thus saith the Lord!" The burden of the preacher's heart is to have his hearers take issue, not with himself, but with the Lord of all glory! The Lord's people come to church to hear Christ; the preacher is merely the ambassador of his Lord (2 Cor. 5:20). Like an ambassador he must declare nothing more or less than the message his Master has given him to declare: he has no liberty to make it more palatable, neither does he have freedom to change it to fit his own agenda or programme. If he does not give it out as he has received it, he is guilty of treason against his Sovereign.

The preacher is a man sent from God to declare God's message. Far from coming together to hear the eloquence of men's words, the Church gathers to hear what Christ Himself says. They say, with Cornelius, "Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God" (Acts 10:33). This is God's own ordering of His Church and the growth of it. In Romans 10:14, we should read, not "how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" but rather, "how shall they believe him whom they have not heard?" The small prepositions "in" and "of" are not warranted by the original text. They must hear Christ himself, not merely *about* Him. This is not to be confused with the neo-orthodox concept of preaching *becoming* the word of God, but rather the necessity of the preacher to speak forth the specially revealed Word of God, the Bible. God's people will never tire of hearing the very words of Scripture.

## ***The Great Subject of Preaching Provides the Context for Worship***

There is no subject for the preacher but that of the glories of the Lord Jesus Christ. Everything that is touched upon in the pulpit is subservient to the context of the Saviour. The preacher does well to remember the answer to the first question of the Shorter Catechism: *Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.*

In how many places could it be said that man's chief end has become evangelism? It is a tempting proposition in the ministry. But there will be no evangelism if the gospel is compromised or abandoned. There will be no evangelism if God is not first glorified in it. It is this perversion of our goal that leads to compromise in worship, wherein the Lord's people begin to think that they must do absolutely anything to get people into their doors. But if they adopt this approach, they have already compromised the message of the gospel itself.

In other places it seems that God's chief end is to glorify man and to enjoy him forever. God is left to beg his own entrance into the heart of the unbeliever, if only that poor soul will deign to invite him in. The plea is made: "Won't you accept the love of Christ? Can't you see him, begging you to approve of his finished work? Won't you make Christ glad by accepting him as your Saviour?" This only glorifies man by putting the completion of salvation in the hand of man.

Salvation is the work of Christ from beginning to end. He is the Alpha and Omega. He will **not** share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8; 48:11). When preaching emphasizes this, it glorifies God and not man. Indeed, man is put in his place: he is nothing but the dust of the earth and must do the bidding of a holy and just God. He is under the condemnation of the Covenant of Works and must needs be placed into the Covenant of Grace. He must be brought to the place of begging that God will be merciful and gracious, rather than just.

Now a very key question presents itself: **Can** you worship a God like this—the God revealed in the Bible? In fact, the question should be: **Must** you worship such a God? The inevitable answer is that the God that is revealed to us in the Scriptures must be worshipped as the One whom He reveals Himself to be. Anything else is idolatry, is it not? The preaching of the Word always humbles a man and lays him very low. At the same time it exalts Christ as the only One who can and has perfectly fulfilled the just demands of a holy God. It presents Him as the only Redeemer of God's elect.

And the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ loves to hear about her Saviour. This is when true worship occurs. May Jesus Christ indeed be praised!

### ***Preaching as Active Worship***

Preaching has often been thought of as passive worship, and there is a very important aspect of this which must not be undermined. In this portion of worship, there is to be a receiving of the Word of God from the mouth of His servant. When it is, in fact the Word of God, then it is to be received as such, and the humble servant of the Lord will learn submission to it. This passive sense of worship has often degenerated in our day to the passivity of being entertained. When a church service does not please the modern man, or "meet his needs", he simply continues his quest for one that does.

This entertainment aspect was brought strikingly to my attention when I recently had the rare privilege of attending an NHL hockey game between the Edmonton Oilers and the Buffalo

Sabres. Before the actual game began, I was “prepared” for it by being subjected to a great variety of sensations in order to “prime” me for the game. There was loud rock music with a strong, steady beat; the arena was blacked out and a display of fireworks erupted as the Oilers lowered an “oil rig” over the doorway to their dressing room in preparation for their grand entrance onto the ice. It was a very exhilarating assault on the senses, and it was very entertaining. But the thought struck me that there were numerous churches in our city who believe that they are competing with the Edmonton Oilers to try to get people to come to church. This is a sad commentary on the state of the church today. When the pulpit is viewed as a place of entertainment, then there is no longer a true pulpit there. The preacher’s job is never to entertain. The preacher’s job is to hold forth the Word of life, to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a spiritual exercise, it must never be a carnal work.

We must never be tempted to think that the chief competition the Church faces is the television set, or the movie theatre, or the hockey or football game, although any of these may pose a real threat to the health of the Church. Opposition to the church will always arise from the world, the flesh and/or the devil. When the Church sets forth Christ in opposition to these, the Lord’s people will find consolation and refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Redeemer of God’s elect.

There is, then, an active, participatory aspect to preaching, which has to do with the involvement of the mind and the soul in the message from God. To the soul that comes to worship with a prepared heart, there is anticipation of blessing and growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is an active involvement in the message, as questions are asked: Is this message consistent with the Word of God? Is there here a sin to be repented of? How am I guilty of that sin? In what way is Christ set before me as the fulfilment of the law and the hope of my soul? Does the message honour my Lord and Saviour?

How do you worship?