

The Nature and Function of Biblical Preaching

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Introduction

In many modern Christian churches, pulpits are filled with men who preach to their congregations' words that do not have their source or purpose in Christ nor his Gospel. While this motivational style of speaking has its place, it is not meant for the pulpit. This paper will aim to demonstrate the nature and function of biblical preaching. It will cover the source of preaching, the form and content of preaching, and the goal of preaching. Preaching, however, is not limited to the formal gathering of the Saints but has its place within the life of all Christians.¹

Preaching is a divine event where the Holy Spirit leads a man to proclaim the truths found within Scripture. J.I. Packer further elaborates “the event of God himself bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction through the words of a spokesperson.”² In addition to Packer’s definition, it can also be said that there must be contextual, accurate, and faithful handling of God’s Word. If the church of God is to be edified in their glorification of God, preachers must be informed of the precedent that God has ordained for the preaching of the Gospel.

The Source of Preaching

Ultimately, the source and creator of the act of preaching is God. In the word, the idea of preaching comes through command (explicit and implicit), calling (affections and giftings), and empowerment (preaching in the Spirit). These three categories sum up the idea that God has

¹ Acts 5:42; Paul Chappell, “Commanded to Preach,” *Daily in the Word*, September 21, 2015. <https://devo.paulchappell.com/commanded-preach>.

² J. I. Packer, *Some Perspectives on Preaching* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1999), 28.

chosen the act of preaching as the means for His revelation to be communicated to the world; preaching is the method that brings God maximum glory.

The Command to Preach

The command to preach is given all through Scripture. This paper will focus on a well-known New Testament passage – the great commission – and a quick look at God’s historical use of preaching to spread His message. Understanding that the Lord has given a command to His people to preach provides the church with a direction and a goal to reach. A command given by God in Scripture is often used as a tool by God to remove the church’s ability to justify their lack of obedience.

The first reference that will be examined is Matthew 28:16-20. In this passage, Jesus takes His final moment on earth to speak to his disciples about their last task. This final task is the preaching of the Gospel to every nation. A common argument to these direct commands of Christ is that the order applied to the Apostles and not Christians today. This argument would be valid except that Paul, who was not at this meeting, seems to have been given this same type of commission as he states in Romans 11:13. Christ’s servants have always had a directive to preach at their core, much like Christ Himself. Paul also makes quite a remarkable statement in Romans 10:14, where it is implied that outside of the preaching of the Gospel, how are people to be saved? The answer is that they cannot; only the preaching of the word can save people, else we become universalists.

Further lending credibility to this claim, the office Prophet was used for this purpose for the entire history of Israel.³ While we are no longer under the Old Covenant,⁴ we can still see that God has historically chosen specific people to preach His Word. While many think that the office of Prophet was primarily a divining role, their primary purpose was to proclaim repentance to the people of God; that same message was carried through even in Christ.⁵ Even further back, God has been shown to use the spoken word to carry out His purposes.⁶

The Call to Preach

As was discussed previously, there is a command from God for the Christian to spread the Gospel. With that understanding, God gives a particular common grace to His church to accomplish this task. However, the Lord seems to give specific people gifting towards preaching (c.f. Rom 12:6-8, Eph 4:1-12, 1 Cor 12:28). These passages don't speak of a particular gift of preaching, but they lay out the idea that God gifts the church with what it needs.⁷ The list of giftings within Scripture is varied and does not seem limited to what is explicitly listed.

Secondly, there is a stirring of affections accompanying those gifted and called to preach the Gospel. Charles Spurgeon makes this observation:

³ Theology of Work, "Introduction to the Prophets," *Theology of Work*. <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/introduction-to-the-prophets>.

⁴ Luke 22:20

⁵ Matt 4:17

⁶ The creation account speaks of God using the spoken word as his method to bring about his power. Gen 1:3-26.

⁷ See Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4 for general lists of giftings; A common list of Biblical giftings are: exhortation, giving, leadership, mercy, prophecy, service, teaching, administration, apostle, discernment, faith, healings, helps, knowledge, miracles, prophecy, teaching, tongues, interpretation of tongues, wisdom, evangelism, pastor, celibacy, hospitality, martyrdom, missionary, and voluntary poverty; Ministry Tools Resource Center, "Spiritual Gifts List and Definitions," *Ministry Tools Resource Center*. <https://mintools.com/gifts-list.htm>.

“The first sign of the heavenly call is an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work. In order to a true call to the ministry there must be an irresistible, overwhelming craving and raging thirst for telling to others what God has done to our own souls...If on the other hand, you can say that for all the wealth of both the Indies you could not and dare not espouse any other calling so as to be put aside from preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then, depend upon it, if other things be equally satisfactory, you have the signs of this apostleship. We must feel that woe is unto us if we preach not the Gospel; the word of God must be unto us as fire in our bones, otherwise, if we undertake the ministry, we shall be unhappy in it, shall be unable to bear the self-denials incident to it, and shall be of little service to those among whom we minister.”

It would be cruel of God to give a man the gift to preach something he cannot comprehend, that being a passionate and affectionate love of God. The preachers' affections must be solely directed toward the God of Heaven to preach the glorious things found within the word.

The Power to Preach

To conclude this section, there must be a discussion of the Spirit's role within the preacher and the act of preaching. There are three major areas in which the Spirit makes the act of preaching unique amongst other methods of communication. First, the Spirit works within the life and words of the preacher. Second, the Spirit works within the lives of the audience. Lastly, the Spirit empowers the word to have an effectual work.

The Spirit's work within the preacher is primarily focused on his transformation into the likeness of Christ. This process of sanctification is a work that only the Spirit of God can accomplish (Rom 8:1-30). As the preacher grows more into the likeness of Christ, his life's affections will gradually change from a deep and abiding love of self to a deep abiding love of the things that Christ loves. Christ best sums up his affections in Matthew 22:37-39, where he states, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all

your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁸

As the preacher’s love changes in this way, his ability to preach the truths of the Gospel is radically changed. This sanctification of self is when a teacher stops teaching and starts preaching. When the preacher feels a deep desire to glorify God through his ministry and an urgent restlessness regarding the state of his audience, he is best able to effectively make a plea to his audience while still “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15b).

The Spirit must also have an effectual work within the audience of the preacher. From Genesis 6, through Ezekiel 36, and into the era post-incarnation of Romans 2, God has made clear that the human heart is hard and not receptive to the truth of Scripture. Therefore, like in the preacher, there must be a sanctifying work done by the Spirit for the message of the Gospel to affect an audience. Ezekiel 11:19-20 says that for the human heart to worship and follow God, he must do a magnificent work within man. God goes as far as to say that it will take an entirely different heart to love him. While the Christian must wait for the culmination of this event, the Spirit does give them a glimpse of what this new, sinless heart will be like through a softening on this earth (Rom 6:1-7).⁹

The Spirit must also give power to the word for it to be effectual. The words and their order within the Bible are nothing special in and of themselves. Many true things are written, but no other source of truth has the same effect as the Bible. The question must then be asked, “What

⁸ All Scripture citations in this work are taken from The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001) unless otherwise noted.

⁹ This softening can be seen in the believer’s conviction (John 16:8), repentance (Rom 3:11), accurate self-examination (Hebrews 4:12), growing gifts (1 Cor 12), and fruit (Gal 5:22-23).

makes the Bible unique in its ability to bring about salvation in the believer?” Charles Spurgeon comments,

“Our text truly says that the Word of God turns us round. It does not mean that the word alone does that apart from the Spirit of God, because a man may read the Bible through fifty times, and, for fifty years, hear sermons that have all come out of the Bible, and yet they will never turn him unless the Spirit of God makes use of the Word of God of the preacher’s sermons. But when the Spirit goes with the word, then the word becomes the instrument of the conversion of the souls of men.”¹⁰

The power of God is what causes his word to be effectual, to go forth and not return void, and to accomplish everything that he wishes it to (Isaiah 55:11).

The Form and Content of Preaching

Now that the source of preaching has been established, it is of next importance to discuss the form and content of preaching. The form of preaching is how God has determined for preaching to take place. The content of preaching would be the subject matter that is to be preached. The content of preaching will be addressed in the next few paragraphs, but the remainder of this section will be focused on the form of preaching. Nehemiah 8:8 will be used as a template for the study, focusing on Ezra’s presentation, explanation, and application of the word.¹¹ Following that will be a brief discussion on the centrality of Christ in the preaching of the word.

The Content of Preaching

The first question that must be asked is, “What is the Christian supposed to preach?”

With access to the completed word, the Christian has been blessed by God in that He makes clear

¹⁰ Charles Spurgeon, *The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon*, Vol 50, *Sermons 2864-2915* (Harrington, DE: Delmarva Publications).

¹¹ J.W. Carter, “The Doctrine of Preaching in the New Testament,” *Biblical Theology*, 2000. <https://www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/DavisS01.html>.

the answer to this question. As a direct answer, the Christian can once again look to the great commission. Christ tells the Apostles that their goal was to disciple, baptize and teach the nations. What is the content that the Apostles were supposed to teach? They were to teach the people to obey everything that Christ had commanded them.

Next the life and ministry of Christ should be looked at to determine what Christ taught the people. This paper does not have room to examine all of Christ's preaching, but some verses clarify the idea that Christ taught the word. In Matthew 5:17, Christ tells His audience that He "did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets...." The law, in this case, is a reference to the Jewish law handed down through Moses. When teaching in the synagogue in Luke 4:16-20, we learn that Christ chose to teach the people from Isaiah 61. Further, in all of Christ's teaching, He never contradicts the teachings of the already written word, and much of His teaching was simply (and divinely) bringing clarity to what had already been written.

As the preacher is to be an imitator of Christ and will one day be formed in His likeness,¹² they would do well to imitate Him in His preaching of the Old Testament. However, Christ is not the only model we can look to if we want to confirm that the word is the message we are to preach. Paul, in his epistle to Timothy, gives him the charge to preach the word. Paul also, in Romans 1:16, says that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation; this message is what was foretold in the Old Testament and is now preserved in the writings of the New Testament. Even as far back as Ezra in Nehemiah 8, it can be seen that the preached message was that of the Word of God.

¹² 2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29.

Presentation of the Word

Nehemiah 8 takes place during the time following the return to Israel by the Jewish nation. To shorten a long story, the work to restore the temple had begun, and the people had just finished building the walls of Jerusalem. Focus shifted from the stability of the land to the peace of the people. To accomplish this, Nehemiah calls upon Ezra to administer the Word to Israel. This is where it is recorded that first, Ezra read from the book of the law.

In both the Old Testament and New Testament, the public reading of Scripture is present and prevalent at major moments within redemptive history. In Exodus 24, in what is possibly the first description of the public worship of God, Moses places the public reading of Scripture as a central. As mentioned previously, the inauguration of Christ's earthly ministry was through the public reading of the Scriptures. Paul seems to have had an understanding that his Epistles were commonly read publicly (Col 4:16).¹³ So, then it must be established as to why the presentation of the word is necessary. Romans 10:17 says that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ." If preaching is intended to affect the souls of men and stir up faith, they must hear the word. While the explanation and application of the word play an important part in the hearer's life, if faith is to be gained, the Word of God must be presented.

Explanation of the Word

Next, we find that Ezra "gave the sense" of the text that was presented. The idea of "gave the sense" is that Ezra took the time to explain what the word meant accurately and in context. To the modern preacher, this begins with a good hermeneutic. The authority of Scripture is lost if

¹³ Justin Borger, "Don't Forsake the Public Reading of Scripture," *Tabletalk*, July 31, 2020. <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/dont-forsake-the-public-reading-of-scripture>.

the hearer is presented with an inaccurate meaning behind the text. If the authority of Scripture is lost with an erroneous understanding, so is its power.

The preacher's goal with his hermeneutic should be that of exegesis (pulling meaning out of the text) rather than eisegesis (placing meaning into the text). He is not free to set limitations upon Scripture that do not exist, nor is he free to grant freedom that God never intended. This is especially important because misrepresentation of the word is a misrepresentation of God. The word is "breathed out" by God and represents His character and is entirely true.

The necessity for Ezra to explain the word comes from the distance between the physical Scriptures and the people. Israel had lost its native understanding of Hebrew, so they could no longer understand what Ezra was speaking. They also lacked a method of reading the word themselves as copies were laborious to make and expensive to obtain. Unlike the Christian, they also lacked an indwelling spirit that granted them discernment over some spiritual things.

In the modern era, Bibles are plentiful, and we have the indwelling Spirit to grant us understanding, so why does the word still need explaining? Much like Israel, there is a disconnect between our language and the language the text is written in, leading to a misinterpretation of ancient words and meanings. A cultural divide also causes the Christian to interpret ancient culture in light of today's culture and not their culture. Lastly, the Christian is still human, so although access to Biblical texts is commonplace, there is still a struggle to read the word consistently. This often presents itself as interpretations that lack both cultural and textual context or proof-texting. This is why the church has been set up in such a way that, while all Christians can and should interpret the word and be devoted in its study, certain men are set apart for its study (Acts 6:4).

Application of the Word

Lastly, Ezra spoke in such a way that the people understood what he was preaching. The Hebrew word for the term means to give heed to, consider, and distinguish. So Ezra explained the text so that the people could use the information given to them. The word we use to describe this result is application. As Ezra applied the word to his audience, so should the modern preacher. James 1:22 warns that we are to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” If the Christian is warned against not applying the word, preachers should take the utmost care to apply their message to their audience. This application process takes the text, distills the information, and brings it into people’s lives.

Good exegesis is the foundation on which the application of a message is built. However, the preacher must also be a student of his audience. Brandon Kelly states, “While teaching the text well requires good exegesis of the text, applying the text requires good exegesis of our people.”¹⁴ Christ displayed this well, perfectly peering into the hearts and minds of His audience and applying the word to the person and situation at hand. This is shown perfectly in Mark 10:17-22 with the rich young ruler. The ruler understood the Word of God but lacked the application for his life. He believed that he had kept the commandments that Christ listed. Jesus, however, knew the man and applied the idea of Leviticus 19:18 to his life, that he should love his neighbor as himself. The application was ultimately too much for the ruler to come to terms with, and he did not follow Christ.

¹⁴ Brandon Kelly, “5 Things Preachers Must Do With the Biblical Text in the Sermon,” *Rookie Preacher*, May 5, 2018. <https://www.rookiepreacher.com/things-preachers-must-do-bible-passage-sermon>.

To effectively apply God's Word, the preacher must first apply the word in his own life. Like was discussed earlier, the preacher is unable to effectively communicate something that he does not understand. Suppose the preacher does not understand how to apply the word in his life. In that case, he will be forced to either neglect the sermon's application, leaving his hearers lacking in their understanding, or manufacture application of which he has no experience and may likely mislead them, bringing condemnation to not only himself but to God.

The Goal of Preaching

Now that it has been established that God has ordained preaching and that its content should be the proclamation of the word, the goal of preaching can now be discussed. Preaching's goal can be split into several categories: glorifying God, proclaiming Christ, proclaiming truth, and increasing the spiritual maturity in believers. Some of the following content cannot help but overlap with the previous two sections since the goal of preaching is built upon them as foundations.

Glorification of God

The primary purpose of preaching is the glorification of God. This idea is important to understand first because, in a sense, the following sections could act as subheadings to this one topic, for they all lead to God's glory, just in more narrowly defined ways. 1 Corinthians 10:31 lists two seemingly mundane and insignificant areas of life and says that we are to glorify God even in those things. The entirety of Scripture indicates that every action of God is done for His glory.¹⁵ Mark Bellinger comments on this idea,

¹⁵ Eph 1:6; Isa 43:7; Jer 13:11; Psalm 106:8; Isa 48:9-11; Rom 15:9; 1 Cor 10:31; 2 Thess 1:9-10; John Piper, "Why Expository Preaching Is Particularly Glorifying to God," *Desiring God*, April 27, 2006. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/why-expository-preaching-is-particularly-glorifying-to-god>.

God created everything through himself and for himself (Colossians 1:16). He created the world to declare his glory (Psalm 19:1-4). He formed and made man with the same intent (Isaiah 43:7). He condemns all who dishonor his name (Exodus 20:7), but he also rescues man to bring honor to his name (Jeremiah 14:7, Psalm 25:11). He rescued the Israelites for the sake of his name so he would not be profaned among the nations (Ezekiel 20:9). He parted the waters for them to gain for himself everlasting renown (Isaiah 63:12-14, Psalm 106:8). He placed Pharaoh in leadership to create for himself the opportunity to display his power and so his name would be proclaimed in all the earth (Exodus 9:16).¹⁶

If we glorify God in mundane things, like eating and drinking, how much more should we glorify God in preaching, and if God does all things for His glory, should preaching be any different? The answer is obviously no.

God, in Psalm 96:3, clearly communicates that His glory is to be spread to all the nations, a parallel with the great commission, and God has chosen the means of the glorious spread to be His people declaring the things that God has done. Further, it is important to note that God's primary means of revelation is that of the spoken word. Even the creation account declares that through Words, God is most glorified. The author of Hebrews opens his letter with this, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Heb 1:1-2a). From the beginning, God has chosen the spoken word as the means by which He gets maximum glorification. Even in the culmination of redemptive history, the life, burial, and resurrection of Christ, God still chose to be glorified through the word, the Living Word.¹⁷ As a carpenter uses the tools that best suit his work, the Christian should use the tool God has chosen to best suit the job at hand, preaching.

¹⁶ Mark Bellenger, "God Does Everything for His Own Glory," *Apply God's Word*, May 14, 2016. <https://applygodsword.com/god-does-everything-for-his-own-glory-verses>.

¹⁷ John 1:1;14; Rev 19:13.

Proclaiming Christ

If there is a climax within redemptive history, if not all of history, it would be the birth, life, death, resurrection, and glorification of Christ. So it must be within the heart and message of the preacher. When dealing with division in the church, Paul declares that his goal was to preach “Christ crucified.”¹⁸ Appealing back to Romans 10:14 again, Paul states that an audience must hear about Christ to be saved. The church lives and dies based on its proclamation of Christ.

All of the teaching within Scripture, doctrine, prophecy, history, and preaching is a tool that leads the hearer to a greater understanding and faith in Jesus Christ. Charles Spurgeon puts it best,

Doctrines are but as the shovel and tongs of the altar, while Christ is the sacrifice smoking thereon. Doctrines are Christ’s garments; verily they all smell of myrrh, and cassia, and aloes out of the ivory palaces, whereby they make us glad, but it is not the garments we care for so much as for the person, the very person of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁹

If the preacher’s message lacks a direct path to Christ, it has missed the mark on what preaching is supposed to be and the very thing that is the foundation of our faith and hope.²⁰

Proclaiming Truth

It is difficult to read the Bible and not be overwhelmed by the centrality of truth, both as a necessity of life and as one of the defining characteristics of who God is. As a counter to God being a God of Truth, we find Satan is referred to as the opposite, a liar. As such, if the preacher

¹⁸ 1 Cor 1:23.

¹⁹ Charles Spurgeon, “It is the Monarch and not the Throne that we Esteem,” *Pristine Grace*. <https://pristinegrace.org/media.php?id=51164>

²⁰ 1 Cor 3:10-11; Ephesians 2:19-22.

is to reflect the character of God in his message accurately, he to must be a declarer of truth and not lies.

Christ places such high regard for understanding the truth in the Scriptures that He goes as far as to say that if His disciples abide in His Word, they will experience truth and that this truth would set them free. This is why it is so important for the preacher to abide in the word, have a strong prayer life, seek God for wisdom and understanding, and develop a good hermeneutic and exegesis. If the Christian is to be a tool in the hand of God for the freeing of souls, he is to be a preacher of truth.

There is such a focus on truth within the Godhead that the idea of truth is laid out separately for all three members. In John 14:6, Christ declares Himself “the way, and the truth, and the life.” In John 16:13, Christ says that the “Spirit of truth” will fall upon the apostles. In Numbers 23:19, Balaam declares that “God is not man, that he should lie...” further going on to state that God not only doesn’t lie but also is not a God who is dishonest through the changing of His mind. The Christian is to preach the Word, and God’s Word is truth. If the word is to be preached, it is to be in truth; otherwise, we are not preaching it, just the fruits of our imagination and selfish desire.

Increased Spiritual Maturity

The final topic that will be covered under the goal of preaching is taken from 2 Tim 3:16. Paul tells Timothy that the word, which is the subject of preaching, is useful for four things: teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. All of these things are used to build

up the church of Christ to be more like Him. One of Paul's goals in ministry was to present his hearers mature in Christ.²¹

When speaking on the roles and gifts in the church in Ephesians 4:11-16, it is said that all of them are given to “build up the body” to “mature to manhood,” and to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” James says that we are to grow into people who are “doers of the word, and not hearers only...”²² Peter encourages the hearer to “grow up into salvation.”²³ In 1 Corinthians 13:11, Paul says that even he grew up and “gave up his childish ways.” In Matthew 5:48, Christ exhorts His hearers to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The message of Christ and the Apostles requires action and growth upon the hearer of the word. Preaching has at its roots a desire to see the people who are hearing transformed into the image of God, from “one degree of glory to another.”²⁴ An unknown author states,

Preaching is an exhortation for the people of God to observe God's truth for their new lives lived in Christ. When the pulpit is filled with an exalting exposition of God's work and word, the Holy Spirit begins to “effect changes among the members of God's church that build them up individually and that builds up the body as a whole.”[3]Preaching should exhort God's people to walk in newness of life – to love God and their neighbor in Christ, to find their joy and hope in Christ, to carry their cross by faith for Christ and to live lives that are set apart in Christ. It should encourage them not to forget what they saw in the mirror (James 1:24-25), but to remember and reform their lives to God's word as the Holy Spirit works to conform their lives to God's Son.²⁵

The heart of the preacher should long to see his hearers “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18)

²¹ Col 1:28-29.

²² James 1:22-25.

²³ 1 Peter 2:2.

²⁴ 2 Cor 3:18.

²⁵ Truth Point Church, “What's the Purpose of Preaching,” *Truth Point Church*, April 20, 2020. <https://www.truthpoint.org/blog/2020/4/30/whats-the-purpose-of-preaching>.

Conclusion

Preaching is a God-ordained source of glory, truth, and exhortation that God has chosen to bring Him maximum glory. The preacher is to take great care in the study of the word and to handle it rightly so that the people of God can best glorify Him and have their lives changed. The Spirit uses the preaching of the word to greatly affect the people of God, growing and transforming them into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ. He has laid out the rules by which the preacher is to preach, and it is the responsibility of the man of God to take the task and methods seriously, for he is to give an account in the last days.

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