

What Did God Say About Preaching?

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Introduction

What did God say about preaching? Now there is a broad topic! The subject of preaching saturates the Bible. We could invest rivers of ink in discussions of the content of our message or the character of the messenger or the counter-cultural nature of the medium of preaching. Given the state of preaching in our culture, we will lay a foundational but crucial proposition in this workshop: Preaching is God's idea. It is no mere human construct that you can mold to fit your own designs—or ignore altogether. Nor should we ever give lip service to its importance while undermining its value through shoddy workmanship.

Preaching is God's idea. He has said that preaching is a divine trust to proclaim what *he* has said so that he will be glorified. We will begin by exploring this foundational idea. The rest of the workshop will tease out some implications of this truth. We will show that what you do with this divine trust reveals what you really believe about other things that God has said. Finally, we will wrap up with some suggestions about how to honor preaching as a divine trust.

I. Preaching is God's idea.

The apostle Paul famously summed up the priority responsibility for his young ministry protégé, Timothy, “Preach the word” (2 Timothy 4:2). From the birth of the church at Pentecost onward, the early church structured its mission around preaching. Scattered, they preached light into the darkened world; gathered, they preached to those enlightened by the gospel. Churches through the centuries have upheld preaching as the centerpiece of the ongoing mission. This preoccupation with preaching did not come about as a mere human construct, a culturally conditioned expedient. *God* determined its content; *God* prepares and calls those who give voice to the message; in the end, *God* establishes the effect of it. Perhaps more than any other time in history, the church in this culture must grapple with the implications of this statement: *Preaching is God's idea*.

A. It is a divine trust . . .

Paul called upon the Father and the Son to serve as solemn witnesses to the charge he gave Timothy: “preach the word” (2 Timothy 4:1-2). He passed the baton with full recognition that the message and its accompanying responsibility came as a trust from God—a trust intended to be passed on intact. Early in the book Paul described the continuing, transgenerational nature of this work with the metaphorical language of a fiduciary trust.

2 Timothy 2:2 (ESV)

² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

“Entrust” is the verbal form of παραθήκη (deposit), which referred to property placed in the care of another.¹ The message and its attendant responsibilities are a sacred trust, the property of one (God) placed in the care of another (the preacher). This becomes clearer when we see that this term appears in 2:2 as the climax of a series of verses that use the same word group (1:12, 14). Verse 11 contains the thought that launches this series. Referring to the gospel message, Paul adds,

2 Timothy 1:11 (ESV)

¹¹ for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher . . .

So preaching is a sacred trust. This truth carries several implications. Chief among them is the fact that every preacher must labor with the sober joy that comes from knowing he serves the interests of another. It is sober because he will give an account for his management of the trust (James 3:1). It is pure joy because he who is but unworthy dust speaks for the One who formed his mouth. What grace! Cf. Ephesians 3:8.

Preaching is a divine trust . . .

B. . . . to proclaim what *God* has said . . .

The biblical term κηρύσσω (I preach) illumines our understanding of the role of the preacher. The word originally described the official duty of one of the courtiers of a king. He bore the responsibility of proclaiming the king’s edicts throughout his kingdom. The preacher’s chief duty was to “get it right.” He had no liberty to introduce his own ideas or inject his creativity in the job. He spoke for the king. The audience had the responsibility to honor the word borne by the preacher because he spoke the words of the king. So the preacher spoke with authority derived from his master and those who heard his words submitted to those words because of their origin.

In the same way, the church’s preachers bear the charge to speak the words of the King of kings.² The New Testament embeds this charge in the divine narrative of the church age. Consider how the apostle John developed this theme.

¹ William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 616.

² Faithfulness to the words of God contained in Scripture does not mean that the preacher brings nothing to the communication process. If that were the case, mere reading of the Bible or even the public display of the printed text would be sufficient. Below we will discuss the appropriate contribution the preacher brings to the message.

- Jesus came as the great “Revealer,” God’s communication to man.³ He came as God’s Spirit empowered Word, sent to deliver God’s words to the apostles. John 1:1, 18; 3:34; 17:8.
- Jesus promised to give the Spirit of truth to the apostles. The Spirit would enable them to recall perfectly the words Jesus gave them, to speak the Spirit’s message, and to complete the message Jesus only began. John 14:16-17, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:12-13.
- Jesus also promised that the Spirit’s enabling work in the apostles would produce a message that He would use effectually to accomplish his work in the world. Jesus’ high priestly prayer anticipated this for he prayed for *us*, that is, all who would believe through the apostles’ message. John 16:7-11; 17:20.
- So Jesus fulfilled his promise, bestowing the empowering Spirit of truth on the apostolic band. They were empowered to produce the authoritative, divine message of the gospel. But when we move into the book of Acts, we find a new entity empowered by the same Spirit to proclaim the message he empowered the apostles to produce. John 20:21-22; Acts 1:8.

We cannot reduce the preaching of the message of Jesus Christ, the message inspired by the Spirit of truth and penned by the apostles, to that status of a side interest of the church. Nor can it be one objective among many. It defines the church’s identity. It is our *raison d’être*.

Certain implications clearly follow. The preacher’s life work is the Scriptures. Preaching is an audacious act because the preacher speaks for God. What margin of error should be acceptable for the man who boldly declares, “Thus saith the Lord?”

C. . . . so that he will be glorified.

“I hear all this talk about glorifying God,” a well-known pastor once said in a public forum, “but we’ll have time for that when we get to heaven. Right now we should be busy winning souls.”

One can only hope that this kind of astonishing ignorance of Scripture no longer exists among those who presume to speak for God. God’s passion for his own glory permeates Scripture. Doxology establishes the only coherent worldview. It is the touchstone of any credible philosophy of ministry. Therefore, it also must shape the church’s preaching mission. Paul told the Corinthians that a message had been entrusted to him by God, a message he believed and spoke, adding:

2 Corinthians 4:15 (ESV)

³ Themes of communication dominate the text of John’s Gospel (word, reveal, witness). For a detailed treatment of this emphasis see James M. Boice, *Witness and Revelation in the Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970.

¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

A vibrant doxology will transform both the preacher and his preaching.

II. Preaching reveals what the preacher really believes.

Since preaching is God's idea, what we do with that idea puts on display what we think about other things God has revealed. Preaching serves as a conduit for our doctrine, both in content and form. Most obviously, it reveals our bibliology. Yet, on close examination we sometimes find a troubling disconnect between much of what preachers say *about* the Bible and the way they actually *handle* the Bible. The same can be said about our theology proper, ecclesiology, hermeneutology, etc. Let's trace some of these connections.

A. It reveals what he believes about the Bible.

What does the preacher really believe about success in ministry? How does he define it? Who is responsible for it? What means will produce it? A preacher may recite pat, orthodox answers to these questions, but his actual practice throws open a window that shines the light on his true beliefs. The preacher who doubts the sufficiency of Scripture feels compelled to employ psychology, entertainment, or some other thing that plays to the itching ears of a sovereign audience. He feels compelled to find what "works."

Commitment to the absolute and sufficient truth of Scripture leaves no room for pragmatism (cf. 2 Timothy 3:10-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-6; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5). The biblical expositor, therefore, occupies himself with the text of Scripture. He does not attempt to mimic entertainers, political analysts, or news commentators. The word of God is his business. He believes without reservation that the word of God alone draws men and women to worship the Triune God.

What God has said is the focus of his sacred trust.

B. It reveals what he believes about God.

Where should the focus of preaching lie? Does the preacher assume that the interests of the Author of Scripture serve the interests of the audience? Or does he set forth the character and works of the Triune God and then summon the audience to behold His glory?

Unfortunately the intent of most preaching is to convince the hearer that the word of God offers immediate relevance to the desires of the audience. A widely celebrated, award winning author on the subject of preaching openly and unmistakably declares this objective. "Our ultimate goal is to teach how what the

Bible says fits their life.” And again, “Our primary intent is not that our listeners learn something but that they use the Scriptures for all the practical ways intended in everyday life.⁴ So preachers frame the message in utilitarian terms. The Bible becomes “God’s answer book.” God serves our audience.

The faithful preacher, however, believes that all things are from God and through God and to God (Romans 11:36). He is the grand subject of the Bible and thus must be the grand subject of our preaching. What about the “felt needs” of our audience? The biblical expositor believes that his people will find perfect resolution to every *true* need only as they meet God in Scripture and there learn to love him above all and beside nothing.

The sacred trust to proclaim what God has said requires the preacher to maintain the focus that God has established. God who declared, “I will not give my glory to another” (Isaiah 48:11) is his own focus.

C. It reveals what he believes about himself.

Some pastors have notoriety thrust upon them because of the wide influence of their ministry. However a troubling new development has emerged; we have entered the age of the so-called “celebrity pastor.” Some pastors even embrace the concept. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of the multisite church which streams live video feeds of the “pastor” to an audience across town or even in another city. One multisite preacher justified the necessity of this by explaining that if the satellite campus had its own preacher, people would not come. Apparently we should not expect the congregation to attend a meeting in which the only attraction is God.

But biblical preaching begins and ends with God—the same God who can use stones to cry out to glorify his Son. In other words, no preacher is indispensable. In fact, the “indispensable” preacher undermines the message by merely by his presence. We need to feel the full impact of Paul’s stinging questions directed to Corinth: what is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants, only servants (1 Corinthians 3:5). What was true then is still true today; God does not need our wisdom and creativity, let alone our celebrity status. The mission will not falter without any one man.

More importantly, we need a deep realization that the preacher serves by grace and the service that grace requires is faithful stewardship of the deposit entrusted to our care.

D. It reveals what he believes about the church.

⁴ Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 108-110.

What is the nature of the assembly? What purpose does its gathering serve? Our ecclesiology emerges very clearly through the pastor's approach to preaching.

In many churches, the interests of the outsider overshadow the interests of the assembly. A nationally known pastor offered to the attendees of a conference an explanation of the purpose he assigned to each of the services in his church. He began with these words: "The purpose of our worship service is evangelism." His philosophy of ministry represents a common misconception. In reality, "worship evangelism" is an absurd oxymoron. Unbelievers cannot worship. This does not mean that worship has no evangelistic value. All proclamation of truth confronts the lost and calls them to submit to the true and living God. But when the lost are our target audience, we cannot structure the service for worship. Consequently, preachers across the land starve their people and ignore God while attempting to force feed the unregenerate with spiritual fast food.

Targeting the wrong audience not only deprives the church of true worship, it also fortifies an unhealthy individualism. An incessant appeal to lost individuals to establish their personal relationship with Christ, while appropriate in certain contexts, tends to rob the church of its essential corporate identity. The New Testament church gathers as a matter of constant devotion to worship with apostolic teaching as the centerpiece (Acts 2:42). This helped forge their corporate identity. The goal of the gospel is not merely the salvation of the individual or a personal relationship with Christ; it is the establishment and growth of the body of Christ.

When we think about biblical exposition, we must remember that the local church does not exist merely as a preaching station in which proclamation of simple gospel truth discharges all responsibility. In fact, that kind of proclamation takes place primarily as the church is scattered. Rather we gather as the body of Christ to hear what God has said—all that God has said. We hear Him in the sermons preached and *together* we respond with adoration and obedience. Thus preaching is central to *corporate* worship.

- E. It reveals what he believes about the lost.

What is humanity's deepest need? Who will reveal this true need? Current trends allow the audience to determine their own needs and the preacher has the job of anticipating those needs and delivering "relevant" sermons to entice the lost to think well of Jesus. Perceived relevance drives material selection in the pulpit. Relevance is not just a buzzword; is the holy grail of many ministries. Church growth guru Peter Wagner compares the current preoccupation with relevance to the seismic upheavals of the Protestant Reformation.

The current reformation is not so much a reformation of faith (the essential theological principles of the Reformation are intact), but a reformation of practice. A major difference was that the sixteenth century

reformation came in reaction to a corrupt and apostate church. This current reformation is not so much against corruption and apostasy as it is against irrelevance.⁵

It is no surprise, then, that many believe preaching must conform to the expectations of the audience. The audience has become sovereign.

Again we ask, what is humanity's deepest need? Some will not play to the expectations of the audience. Instead, they instinctively respond, the deepest need is forgiveness of sins. To be sure, every son and daughter of Adam has this need, but that answer is actually reductionistic. It fails to express the full scope of the human dilemma. It misses the mark and reduces a vast, cosmic tragedy to status of individual need. Left uncorrected, this unbalanced preaching has the potential to perpetuate and calcify the listener's self-focus.

Humanity's deepest need is a transformation of worship. The cosmic tragedy is that the God who is worthy to have every ounce of our energy devoted to his worship and service has been rejected, despised, and replaced with idols. We enter this world as sinners in need of forgiveness only because we are idolaters by nature and by choice. Our hearts are a "perpetual factory of idols" (Calvin). This is why the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The greatest commandment leaves no room for competing affections. Thus the greatest command unmasks our greatest failure and deepest need. But the gospel message transforms life-long idolaters into worshipers of the true and living God. Forgiveness—important as it is—forms only one aspect of our great salvation.

The preaching of the biblical expositor confronts the lost with his deepest need. His preaching then leads those who believe into ever-deepening worship, engaging their affections with the "whole counsel of God."

III. Preaching deserves (and requires) our best work.

Here are some suggestions that will keep us true to the divine trust we call preaching. Think of them as basic disciplines.

A. Preach long, wide swaths through the Scriptures.

By "long," I mean preach large sections, particularly complete books of the Bible. Since we need to hear what God has said, how can we be faithful to the trust if we reserve the right to pick and choose snatches of God's message, wrested from their context, and presented according to our designs? Is it not obvious that we should attempt to hear what God has said as he said it? That requires attention to flow of argument and form of content.

⁵ C. Peter Wagner, cited by Ryken, *City on a Hill*, 21.

By “wide,” I mean labor to connect the sermons to the biblical metanarrative. Show where the book fits in. We tend to move from words to sentences to paragraphs to the book as we interpret and preach. That is, we begin with the text and move outward. Unfortunately, misconceptions we embrace locally tend to become the lens through which we see the big picture. A better approach is to move from the biblical storyline to the book.⁶ Determine the role of the book in the overarching plan of God. Explain the contribution that it makes to the story of the King. Then show how the book fits together. Employ the analogy of faith to explain the essential theological ideas in the book’s message connecting it to the rest of Scripture.

Nothing else will counteract the misuse of text selection to avoid or skew what God has said. Nothing will reduce our tendency to impose our own ideas on the text so much as this. This commitment takes personal discipline to develop the appropriate skills over a long period of time. It also takes hard work to help a congregation develop a taste for this kind of preaching. However, this is the path of long obedience.

B. Preach the point—and how it was determined.

One difficulty the expositor faces has to do with the choice of what to leave “on the cutting room floor.” Study always yields more material than the preacher can or should use. Some novice preachers include too many extraneous details. After all, if they did the work, the audience should appreciate all that they discovered! Today, there is a different trend. Preachers accept the need to preach the “big idea of the text,” but leave its details behind because they interfere with the “flow” of the sermon (particularly if the preacher prefers a narrative style).

Every time the preacher steps into the pulpit he should have a lively sense of responsibility to proclaim the point of the text *and* demonstrate how he arrived at the point. The latter accomplishes two vital goals: 1) it fortifies the authority of the message by removing all doubt that it is God’s word, not man’s and 2) it instructs God’s people in the essential principles of biblical interpretation.

So the preacher should include enough detail to make the text plain, but not so much that the point of the text becomes obscured.

C. Preach your own work.

There are many reasons I say this. Most importantly, this is a matter of *ethos*. We all interact with the work of others every time we prepare a sermon—that is the nature of research. But the wholesale “borrowing” of the work of others is not research; it is plagiarism. Plagiarism is a character issue.

⁶ For a helpful discussion of the role of canon in hermeneutics, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Kregel Academic & Professional, 2011).

Beyond the issue of character, failure to do one's own work unmasks unhealthy attitudes toward the church and the role of the pastor. For example, a pastor might borrow sermons from others and present them with attribution (avoiding the charge of plagiarism). Yet, his practice reveals that he does not believe that diligent study and proclamation of the word is his primary responsibility. If he gives attribution, his congregation knows that he invests his time in other ministry initiatives, thus potentially undermining their commitment to listen and honor biblical exposition. Preaching, they may conclude, is of secondary importance—and perhaps unimportant.

Preach your own work. You are not in competition with the famous and polished. You need both the experience and the fruit of your studies. Your people need to see your commitment to the task. Together you and your congregation will demonstrate mutual commitment to God's design for the church.

D. Preach for worship.

Make the church the target audience for the sermon. As noted above, many assume that the primary goal of preaching is the salvation of the lost. This assumption has radically transformed worship in the church, often killing it. Remember that the church gathers on the Lord's Day as a community of faith for the purpose of worshipping the Triune God who redeemed it through Jesus Christ. Create that expectation. Plan far ahead to facilitate seamless integration of the components of the service, from the call to worship to the final prayer.

Make God the focus of the service. Resist the temptation to force the Scriptures to serve the desires of the congregation. Instead, follow the lead of Scripture. It will lead you to set forth the God of the Bible in his glory, and to exalt his Son. We do not worship because we are needy; we worship because he is worthy. Commitment to biblical worship will necessarily change some of our (recent) traditions. It will mean that we stop allowing the Hallmark card industry to set our preaching schedule. It will mean that we stop elevating patriotism to sacred status. God is the subject of Scripture and he must be the subject of our preaching.

E. Preach with godly imagination.⁷

Since the Spirit of God uses the word of God to create children of God, we need to understand what the preacher brings to the process. Should he merely read the text of Scripture? Perhaps he should read a commentary along with the text so that he only provides a close explanation of words and grammar.

⁷ The importance of imagination has been addressed at length elsewhere. For example, see the helpful discussion by Kevin Bauder that begins here: <http://sharperiron.org/article/importance-of-imagination-part-1>.

The preacher explains the text and illumines its meaning but his role goes beyond mere *logos*.⁸ Aside from the strength of character that forms a living context for the sermon (*ethos*), he brings the text to life with his *pathos*. Of course I do not commend emotion for its own sake, still less, emotion used as a manipulative tool. But the effective preacher communicates his own commitment to the message. He worships and invites his audience to worship, as well.

How does *pathos* happen without artificiality or contrivance? It occurs when the preacher cultivates the ability to construct a mental “image” of biblical truth. He images or imagines the truth contained in the text. Sometimes he imagines the situation of the author or original readers. Sometimes he imagines the metaphors expressed or implied in the language of the text. Imagination, shaped by understanding of the biblical text, connects the preacher with the Bible’s characters as well as its historical and theological realities. Truth rightly imagined is a key to shaping the preacher’s own affections, drawing him into worship. When he preaches, he then invites his audience to share his imaginings and worship with him.

F. Preach with clarity—and leave it there.

Most of the discussion about preaching in a postmodern, postchristian world completely ignores the sovereign, regenerating work of the Spirit of God. In the end, no one will be saved because of our creativity or displays of cultural relevance. They will not even be saved because of our homiletical skills. They will be saved according to the will of God as the Spirit of God uses the word of God to breathe spiritual life into the spiritually dead. No preacher can control that. We must simply proclaim the word with as much clarity as we can, proclaim the word in ways that show we believe it, summon our listeners to believe it too—and then leave the outcome to Him.

J. C. Ryle, a bishop in the church of England in the nineteenth century, offered the men in his denomination this advice based on the influence of Charles Spurgeon:

Let us pray to be kept from corrupting God’s Word. Let neither fear nor favour of man induce us to keep back, or avoid, or change, or mutilate, or qualify any text in the Bible. Surely we ought to have holy boldness when we speak as ambassadors of God. We have no reason to be ashamed of any statement we make in our pulpits so long as it is Scriptural. I have often thought that one great secret of the marvelous honor which God has put on a man who is not in our communion (I allude to Mr. Spurgeon)—is, the extraordinary boldness and confidence with which he stands up in the pulpit to speak to people about their sins and their souls. It cannot be said he does it from fear of any, or to please any.

⁸ The terms *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* refer to Aristotle’s classic description of persuasive rhetoric. *Logos* refers to the logic or reason of argument. *Ethos* is the character of the speaker that contributes to the strength of the argument. *Pathos* is the emotive element or the passion of the speaker. Though preaching involves more (e.g., the work of the Spirit), his analysis of the components of communication remains useful.

He seems to give every class of hearers its portion, —to the rich and the poor, the high and the low, the peer and the peasant, the learned and the illiterate. He gives to every one plain dealing, according to God's Word. I believe that very boldness has much to do with the success which God is pleased to give to his ministry. Let us not be ashamed to learn a lesson from him in this respect. Let us go and do likewise.⁹

Amen.

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Warnings to the Church* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2007), 37.