

THE PRIMACY OF PREACHING

By Ray C. Stedman

I believe in preaching! The fall of 1987 will mark my 37th year in one pulpit, and for all of those years I have considered preaching to be my primary task. I have been greatly encouraged in this commitment by the example of great preachers of the past and of the present. Among the latter have been Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Dr. J. R. W. Stott, and Dr. Stephen Olford. The fact that these are all British preachers speaks well of the quality of British preaching, and, perhaps, of the relative weakness of the American pulpit. To the degree that this is so I would attribute it to the fact that British evangelicals tend more toward expository preaching than their American counterparts. For it is expository preaching that constitutes, in my judgment, the only true form of preaching!

Expository sermons are those which derive their content from Scripture itself. They borrow their structure and thrust from a specific passage. They make the same point that the passage makes, and apply that point with directness and urgency to contemporary life. What other modes of preaching often lack is biblical content. Those in the pews are often drowning in words, but thirsting for knowledge. John Stek, of Calvin Seminary, puts it well: "Preachers who rummage through the Bible to find texts on which to hang topical sermons are often guilty of substituting their word for the biblical Word."* This soon results in an unconscious trivializing of preaching.

Proof of this trivializing is found in the widespread biblical illiteracy that exists today. Many persons in the average congregation do not know the meaning of terms like justification by faith, or sanctification, or the kingdom of God, or the new covenant, or the walk in the Spirit, the flesh, or even faith, love, and peace! Worse yet, because they don't know the biblical meaning of "flesh", for instance, they do not know how to recognize it in themselves, and the flesh therefore rages in unrestrained destructiveness throughout their thinking and living. Because they know nothing of the nature of the new covenant, they live continually in the legal bondages of the old. Because they do not understand the wisdom of God, they succumb constantly to the pompous pretensions of the wisdom of the world. Because they do not know how to use the shield of faith, they are besieged daily by the fiery darts of the wicked one.

What is essential therefore in preaching is, first of all, content! It is what Paul calls "the unsearchable riches of Christ." In a verse that has meant much to me personally, Paul calls himself and other first century preachers: "stewards of the mysteries of God," (I Cor. 4:1). He sees himself as entrusted with a fabulous deposit of truth which he is responsible to dispense to others. It ought to be the supreme business of a preacher to discharge that responsibility with utter faithfulness. Paul adds: "It is required of a steward that one be found faithful." So he says, in another place, he sought always "to declare the whole counsel of God."

In my opinion, much of the present weakness in preaching is due to the failure of preachers to understand the uniqueness of what they are to preach, and its remarkable power to change a congregation, a community, a city, or even a nation. When Paul came to Corinth, as he tells us in I Corinthians 2, he came "in weakness and fear and much trembling." He was, in actual fact, intimidated by Corinth! He knew these Greek cities well, and they frightened and discouraged him. He saw the terrible degradation of Corinth and it looked incurable. Sexual depravity, centered in the temple of Aphrodite perched on the AcroCorinth overlooking the city, was so widespread and so popular it seemed impossible to oppose. Paul knew the superstitious fears of the masses in Corinth, he was aware of the devious dishonesty of its politicians, and the shameless injustice of the city courts.

He had often himself felt the tyranny of Rome in its iron-fisted control of the whole known world, especially evident in Corinth because of its past history of rebellion. He saw daily the hopeless despair of the citizenry:

one half slave to the other half and living in misery and near starvation. Yet, in contrast, he felt the pride of Corinth in its beautiful location; the arrogance of its philosophers as heirs of the great thinkers of Greece; the wealth which the city's commerce brought; the acclaim it enjoyed as one of the chief cities of the Empire. How could he reach it? How could he change it? It looked impenetrable, unassailable!

But then he remembered his message---and his resource! He began to preach, "not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power." That demonstration derived from what, in the subsequent verses, he describes in some detail as "the wisdom of God." It is also that which in chapter 4 he terms, "the mysteries of God." It has several outstanding characteristics, of which I now take but three.

1. The wisdom of God is in sharp contrast to the world's wisdom: "Not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away," (NIV "coming to nothing"). When he speaks of the rulers of this age he means more than government officials. The phrase refers to the leaders of thought in any age, the movers and shakers, the mind-benders--not only statesmen, but philosophers, thinkers, scientists, educators. "Doomed to pass away," describes their transient character. Their plans and ideas are in a constant flux. They swing from one extreme to another, or flow in cycles of acceptance like fads in fashion. Everyone knows that no science textbook more than ten years old is worth owning today. Economic theories change like the tides, ebbing and flowing with the Dow-Jones averages. Educational policies come in cycles, alternating between extremes of permissiveness and heavy control. Political programs, all promising boundless prosperity, appear every election year. (I have now lived through the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the Great Society, Camelot, Peace with honor, the Camp David process, and now Reagonomics, all promising much, but delivering little).

This constant change gives rise to much of the rush and restlessness of modern living. It is all "doomed to pass away" or is "coming to nothing". Perhaps its effect has been best caught by a modern jingle that reads:

This is the Age of the Half-read Page
And the Quick Bash, and the Mad Dash
The Bright Night, with the Nerves Tight
The Plane Hop, with a Brief Stop
The Lamp Tan in a Short Span
The Big Shot in a Good Spot
And the Brain Strain and the Heart Pain
And the Cat-Naps, till the Spring Snaps
And the Fun's Done!

In sharp contrast, the Word of God remains unchanged and unchangeable. Always relevant, always up-to-date, always perceptive and penetrating--eternally accurate!

2. The truth of God's wisdom is unique and unrivalled: "We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification." The paramount glory of the gospel is that there is nothing like it anywhere else. It is without rival, either in the scientific laboratory, in the psychologist's office, or the philosopher's study. It is this factor that constitutes the supreme value of preaching. It simply does what nothing else can do! Here in this chapter, Paul calls this truth, "the deep things of God," "the thoughts of God," "spiritual truth," and "the mind of Christ!" Since it originates in God alone, it stands in sharp contrast with the thinking of men.

When Jesus came he told his disciples that he "would utter things kept secret since the foundation of the world," (Mt. 13:35). He said, "Many prophets and righteous men have longed to hear what you hear, but did not hear it." In I Cor. 2, Paul declares these truths have now been revealed to us through the Spirit, and he sums it all up in the arresting phrase, "the secret and hidden wisdom of God." Since I preach in a university community, this has always meant to me that when I open this Book on a Sunday morning, I am offering to the physicists, the scientists, the high-tech engineers, the doctors, lawyers, bankers, and captains of industry present, as well as artisans, secretaries, plumbers, and many others, essential knowledge about themselves and about life, which they never learned, nor could learn, in any secular college or graduate school! I am privileged to give them an understanding of reality unattainable from any other source.

It is the business of preaching to change the total worldview of every member of the congregation; to dispel the secular illusions which are widely believed around, and to identify and underscore the concepts and practices that are right, and to do this for each member. Perhaps the most amazing statement of all in this amazing verse is that this hidden truth is "for our glorification!" The Westminster Confession properly states that the chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. But this verse declares that God plans and works "for our (that is, human) glorification."

To glorify anyone or anything is to make openly manifest the hidden values within. God glorifies himself when he reveals himself to us. John says of Jesus, "The Word was made flesh ... and we beheld his glory." What was that glory? John tells us precisely, "... full of grace and truth." That was the glory of Jesus: grace and truth!

What, then, is the glory of man--of ourselves? It is to display outwardly all that God made us to be! To be (to use a modern term) a whole person! The truly fascinating thing is that this is what every person, without exception, wants to be! Listen to people talking and you will hear it expressed everywhere. "I want to be me!" "I'm looking for fulfillment." "I'm trying to get my act together." What we are sent to preach is clearly what everyone everywhere desperately wants to find!

But right here is the tragedy of much modern preaching. Preachers have lost sight of this great fact. They actually have come to believe that the average person no longer has any religious interest. They seek to reach him or her by appealing to their respect for knowledge or science or philosophy. If this lack of religious interest appears to be true, it is because preaching has failed to make clear that what men eagerly want to find--the secret of human fulfillment--is what God is lovingly offering to give! True preaching, the preaching of "the secret and hidden wisdom of God" will result in human glorification, the actual fulfillment of man's deepest desires.

This hidden wisdom, as Paul declares plainly in verse 2, is: "Jesus Christ and him crucified." In chapter one Paul terms it, "the word of the Cross." It is a message so totally different from the thinking of the world that it constitutes, "the offense of the Cross." It declares that until man is changed by a gracious act of God, his highest efforts and most clever schemes for self-improvement will not only prove ineffective--they will actually make things worse! By trying to control his own destiny and run his own world, he will end by not only destroying himself, but his world as well. Do we need anything else but history or the newspaper to confirm that? On a recent visit to Stanford University, Malcolm Muggeridge summed up the approaching end of Western civilization in this remarkable quote from an American critic, Leslie Fiedler.

"The final conclusion would seem to be that whereas other civilizations have been brought down by attacks of barbarians from without, ours had the unique distinction of training its own destroyers at its own educational institutions and providing them with facilities for propagating their destructive ideology far and wide, all at the public expense.

Thus did Western man decide to abolish himself, creating his own boredom out of his own affluence, his own vulnerability out of his own strength, his own impotence out of his own erotomania, himself blowing the trumpet that brought the walls of his own city tumbling down. And, having convinced himself that he is too numerous, labors with pill and scalpel and syringe to make himself fewer, until at last, having educated himself into imbecility and polluted and drugged himself into stupefaction, he keels over, a weary, battered old brontosaurus, and becomes extinct."**

Though brilliantly stated, this is scarcely hyperbole. It is happening all around us, and is an inescapable result of "human wisdom."

3. The wisdom of God exposes the incredible blunders which human wisdom makes: "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory." Here were keen, intelligent men, priding themselves on their ability to govern, to make decisions, and to understand men. Yet

when Truth himself appeared before them they could not recognize him, totally misunderstood and mishandled him, and ended by nailing him to a Cross. That tendency to commit terrible blunders is characteristic of the wisdom of the world. It is the reason why we live on a polluted planet today, torn by strife and schism, and threatened by violence and meaninglessness on all sides. It is the business of preaching to identify such blunders and to give help to those who fail to see these unrecognized errors in society today.

Listen to any television news broadcast and in the course of it you will be exposed to 15 or 20 commercials, urging you to buy a product, to take a trip, or to spend your money in some other way. Note how many times you hear the word, "deserve." "You deserve this---you've got it coming to you---you're the kind of person who has a right to expect this." "You deserve a break today!" Gradually listeners begin to believe this subtle propaganda. The end result of it is to remove all possibility of gratitude. You don't feel grateful when you finally get what you feel you have long deserved---you are only angry that you didn't get it sooner, or you didn't get as much as the next fellow. And if you don't get it at all, you can only feel resentful and abused.

What the media is unknowingly producing is a nation of angry, resentful people, dissatisfied with all they have. And since gratitude is the chief ingredient of joy, we find ourselves in the midst of a joyless people, seeking fun continually, but unable to know joy. And this includes thousands of Christians! It is the business of the preacher to point out these effects and direct people to the true sources of joy. The truth is, we do not deserve any good thing! We belong to a race that deserves to be eliminated from the earth. Because we live in continual enmity against God, and in rebellion to his laws, we deserve death. But that is not what we are given! By the grace and mercy of a loving God, we are given life, often long lives,--and we are given beauty, and family love, and food and shelter and many, many other blessings. Even more, we are given opportunities to learn the truth, and if we follow them, we are given forgiveness, and acceptance, and love and peace---and joy!

Because of these undeserved gifts, everyone's normal attitude should be one of intense gratitude. This is why Scripture exhorts us continually to thanksgiving. Every good gift, and every perfect gift, for which men are properly thankful, comes, as James tell us, "from above, from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, even the shadow of turning." Even those gifts we call trials, are from the same source, sent to make us do what we don't want to do, in order to be what we've always wanted to be!

When Paul began to preach this message in Corinth, in dependence on the power of the Spirit, Corinth began to change. Acts 18 says, "Many of the Corinthians, hearing Paul, believed and were baptized." There sprang up in that pagan city a group of changed people. They lost their fears and their despair. Under the impact of new life from within, they were gradually changed into loving, caring, wholesome people. Some still struggled with the residues of their past, but the city was never the same again. And because of that, the history of the world has been changed as well.

There is much more I could say, but perhaps this is enough to help us see the enormous consequences of true preaching, and the terrible blight that falls upon a congregation or community which is deprived of these "unsearchable riches of Christ." My plea is, let preachers stop feeding people with moral platitudes and psychological pablum. Let us say once more, with Jeremiah,

"Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your Word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart."

* From an article published in Christianity Today, 1986

** Quoted in The Trousered Ape by Duncan Williams.

Scriptural quotations are from the Revised Standard Version *

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