

PREACHING CHRIST ALONE

If our preaching does not center on Christ--from Genesis to Revelation - no matter how good or helpful, it is not a proclamation of God's Word.

Michael S. Horton - Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

"You search the Scriptures in vain, thinking that you have eternal life in them, not realizing that it is they which testify concerning me." With these words, our Lord confronted what has always been the temptation in our reading of Holy Scripture: to read it without Christ as the supreme focus of revelation.

Many people who come to embrace the specific tenets of the Protestant Reformation (grace alone, scripture alone, Christ alone, to God alone be glory, faith alone, etc.) are liberated by the good news of God's free grace in Christ. Pastors who used to preach a human-centered message suddenly become impassioned defenders of God's glory and particular doctrines which often characterized the messages and shaped the teaching ministry of the congregation are exchanged for more biblical truths. This is all very exciting, of course, and we should be grateful to God for awakening us (this writer included) to the doctrines of grace. Nevertheless, there are deeper issues involved.

Not infrequently, we run into a church that is very excited about having just discovered the Reformation faith, but the preaching remains what it always was: witty, perhaps anecdotal (plenty of stories and illustrations that often serve the purpose of entertainment rather than illumination of a point), and moralistic (Bible characters surveyed for their usefulness in teaching moral lessons for our daily life). This is because we have not yet integrated our systematic theology with our hermeneutics (i.e., way of interpreting Scripture). We say, "Christ alone!" in our doctrine of salvation, but in actual practice our devotional life is saturated with sappy and trivial "principles" and the preaching is often directed toward motivating us through practical tips.

What we intend to do in this issue is present an urgent call to recover the lost art of *Reformational preaching*. This isn't just a matter of concern for preachers themselves, for the ministry of the Word is something that is committed to every believer, since we are all witnesses to God's unfolding revelation in Christ. It is not only important for those who speak for God in the pulpit in public assemblies, but for the layperson who reads his or her Bible and wonders, "How can I make sense of it all?" Below, I want to point out why we think there has been a decline of evangelical preaching in this important area.

Moralism

I have already referred to this threat and it will be the target of a good deal of criticism throughout this issue. Whenever the story of David and Goliath is used to motivate you to think about the "Goliaths" in your life and the "Seven Stones of Victory" used to defeat them, you have been the victim of moralistic preaching. The same is true whenever the primary intention of the sermon is to give you a Bible hero to emulate or a villain to teach a lesson, like "crime doesn't pay," or, "sin doesn't really make you happy." Reading or hearing the Bible in this way turns the Scriptures into a sort of Aesop's Fables or Grimm's Fairy Tales, where the story exists for the purpose of teaching a lesson to the wise and the story ends with, "and they lived happily ever after." In his *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis has *Screwtape* writing Wormwood in the attempt to persuade Wormwood to undermine the faith by turning Jesus into a great hero and moralist.

He has to be a 'great man' in the modern sense of the word--one standing at the terminus of some centrifugal and unbalanced line of thought--a crank vending a panacea. We thus distract men's minds from Who He is, and what He did. We first make Him solely a teacher, and then conceal the very substantial agreement between His teaching and those of other great moral teachers.

This is the greatest problem, from my own experience, with the preaching we hear today. There is such a demand to be practical--that is, to have clever principles for daily living. But the danger, of course, is that what one hears on Sunday morning is not the Word of God. To be sure, the Scriptures were read (maybe) and there was a sermon (perhaps), but the message had more in common with a talk at the

Lion's Club, a pop-psychology seminar, prophecy conference or political convention than with proclamation of heavenly truth "from above."

Because we are already seated with Christ in the heavens (Eph.2:4) and are already participating in the new creation that dawned with Christ's resurrection, we are to be heavenly-minded. This, of course, does not mean that we are irrelevant mystics who have no use for this world; rather, it means that we are oriented in our outlook toward God rather than humanity (including ourselves), the eternal rather than this present age, holiness rather than happiness, glorifying God rather than demanding that God meet our "felt needs." Only with this kind of orientation can we be of use to this world as "salt" and "light," bearing a distinctive testimony to the transcendent in a world that is so bound to the present moment.

Finally, moralism commits a basic hermeneutical error, from the Reformation point of view. Both Lutherans and the Reformed have insisted, in the words of the Second Helvetic Confession, "The Gospel is, indeed, opposed to the law. For the law works wrath and announces a curse, whereas the Gospel preaches grace and blessing." Calvin and his successor, Beza, followed the common Lutheran understanding that while both the law and the Gospel were clearly taught in Scripture (in both Old and New Testaments), that the confusion of the two categories lay at the heart of all wayward preaching and teaching in the church. It is not that the Old Testament believers were under the law and we are under grace or the Gospel, but rather that believers in both Testaments are obligated to the moral law, to perfectly obey its precepts and conform to its purity not only in outward deed, but in the frame and fashion of heart and soul. And yet, in both Testaments, believers are offered the Gospel of Christ's righteousness placed over the naked, law-breaking sinner so that God can accept the wicked--yes, even the wicked for the sake of Christ.

Both Lutherans and the Reformed have also affirmed that the law still has a place after conversion in the life of the believer, as the only commands for works that are now done in faith. Nevertheless, preaching must observe clearly the distinction between these two things. As John Murray writes, "The law can never give the believer any spiritual power to obey its commands." And yet, so much of the moralistic preaching we get these days presupposes the error that somehow principles, steps for victory, rules, guidelines that the preacher has cleverly devised (i.e., the traditions of men?) promise spiritual success to those who will simply put them into daily practice. Those who are new in the faith regard this kind of preaching as useful and practical; those who have been around it for a while eventually burn out and grow cynical about the Christian life because they cannot "gain victory" even though they have tried everything in the book.

It must be said that not even the commands of God himself can give us life or the power to grow as Christians. The statutes are right and good, but I am not, Paul said in Romans 7. Even the believer cannot gain any strength from the law. The law can only tell him what is right; the Gospel alone can make him right by giving him what he cannot gain by law-keeping. If the law itself is rendered powerless by human sinfulness, how on earth could we possibly believe that humanly devised schemes and principles for victory and spiritual power could achieve success? We look to the law for the standard, realizing that even as Christians we fall far short of reaching it. Just then, the Gospel steps in and tells us that someone has attained that standard, that victory, for us, in our place, and now the law can be preached again without tormenting our conscience. It cannot provoke us to fear or anxiety, since its demands are fulfilled by someone else's obedience.

Therefore, it is our duty to preach "the whole counsel of God," which includes everything in the category of law (the divine commandments and threats of punishment; the call to repentance and conversion, sanctification and service to God and our neighbor) and in the category of Gospel (God's promise of rest, from Genesis to Revelation; its fulfillment in Christ's death, burial and resurrection, ascension, intercession, second coming; the gift of faith, through which the believer is justified and entered into a vital union with Christ; the gift of persevering faith, which enables us to pursue godliness in spite of suffering). But any type of preaching that fails to underscore the role of the law in condemning the sinner and the role of the Gospel in justifying the sinner or confuses these two is a serious violation of the distinction which Paul himself makes in Galatians 3:15-25.

Much of the evangelical preaching with which I am familiar neither inspires a terror of God's righteousness nor praise for the depths of God's grace in his gift of righteousness. Rather, it is often a confusion of these two, so that the bad news isn't quite that bad and the good news isn't all that good. We actually can do something to get closer to God; we aren't so far from God that we cannot make use of the examples of the biblical characters and attain righteousness by following the "Seven Steps to the Spirit-Filled Life." But in the biblical view, the biblical characters are not examples of their victory, but of God's! The life of David is not a testimony to David's faithfulness, surely, but to God's and for us to read any part of that story as though we could attain the Gospel (righteousness) by the law (obedience) is the age-old error of Cain, the Pharisees, the Galatian Judaizers, the Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians, Arminians, and Higher Life proponents.

There are varieties of moralism. Some moralists are sentimental in their preaching. In other words, the goal is to be helpful and a loving nurturer who aims each Sunday at affirming his congregation with the wise sayings of a Jesus who sounds a lot like a talk-show therapist. Other moralists are harsh in their preaching. Their Gospel is, "Do this and you shall live." In other words, unless you can measure a growth in holiness by any number of indicators or barometers, you should not conclude that you are entitled to the promises. The Gospel, for these preachers, is law and the law is Gospel. One can attain God's forgiveness and acceptance only through constant self-assessment. Doubt rather than assurance marks mature Christian reflection, these preachers insist, in sharp distinction to the tenderness of the Savior who excluded only those who thought they had jumped through all the right hoops. The sinners were welcome at Christ's table, the "righteous" were clearly not.

Therefore, even the Christian needs to be constantly reminded that his sanctification is so slow and imperfect in this life that not one single spiritual blessing can be pried from God's hand by obedience; it is all there in the Father's open, outstretched hand. This, of course, is the death-knell to moralism of every stripe. The bad news is very bad indeed; the good news is greater than any earthly moral wisdom. That's why Paul said, paraphrased, "You Greek Christians in Corinth want moral wisdom? OK, I'll give you wisdom: Christ is made our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Aha! God in his foolishness is wiser than all the world's self-help gurus!" (1 Cor. 1:18-31).

Moralism might answer the "felt needs" of those who demand practical and inspirational pep talks on Sunday morning, but it cannot really be considered preaching.

Verse-By-Verse Exposition

Having been raised in churches which painstakingly exegeted a particular passage verse-by-verse, I have profited from the insights this method sometimes offers. Nevertheless, it too falls short of an adequate way of preaching, reading, or interpreting the sacred text.

First, an explanation of how this is done. I remember the pastor going through even rather brief books like Jude over a period of several months and there we would be, pen and paper in hand as though we were in a classroom, following his outline--either printed in the bulletin or on an overhead projector. Words would be taken apart like an auto mechanic taking apart an engine, conducting an extensive study on the root of that word in the Greek language. This is inadvisable, first, because word studies often focus on etymology (i.e., what is the root of the word in the original language?) rather than on the use of the word in ancient literature, for very often the use of a particular word in ancient literature had nothing at all to do with the root meaning of the word itself. It is dangerous to think of biblical words as magical or different somehow from the same words in the secular works of their day.

This approach is also dangerous because it "misses the forest for the trees." In other words, revelation is one long, unfolding drama of redemption and to get wrapped up in a technical analysis of bits and pieces fails to do justice to the larger context of the text. What God intended as one continuous story that is proclaimed each week to remind the faithful of God's promise and our calling is often turned into an arduous and irrelevant search for words. The same tendency is present in Bible study methods or study Bibles that outline, take apart, and put back together the pieces of the Bible in such a way as to get in the way of the Scripture's inherent power and authority.

Another fault of this verse-by-verse method is that it often fails to appreciate the variety of genre in the biblical text and imposes a woodenly literalistic grid on passages that are meant to be preached, read,

or interpreted in a different way. The Bible is not a textbook of geometry that can be reductionistically dissected for simple conclusions, but a book in which God himself speaks to us, disclosing his nature, his purpose, and his unfolding plan of redemption through history.

A final danger of this method is that it tends to remove the congregation from the text of Scripture. Even though the hearers may be very involved taking notes, it only serves to reinforce in their experience that they could not simply sit down and read their English Bibles for themselves and discover the deeper meaning of the text apart from those who have the method down and know the original languages.

Carelessness

Unfortunately, too much of the preaching we come across these days does not even have the merit of attempting a faithful exposition of the Scriptures, as these preceding methods do.

When John Calvin was asked to respond to Cardinal Sadoletto as to why Geneva was irretrievably Protestant, the Reformer included this indictment of the state of preaching before the Reformation: Nay, what one sermon was there from which old wives might not carry off more whimsies than they could devise at their own fireside in a month? For as sermons were usually then divided, the first half was devoted to those misty questions of the schools which might astonish the rude populace, while the second contained sweet stories and amusing speculations by which the hearers might be kept awake. Only a few expressions were thrown in from the Word of God, that by their majesty they might procure credit for these frivolities.

Calvin then contrasts this former way of preaching with the Reformation approach to Scripture: First, we bid a man to begin by examining himself, and this not in a superficial and perfunctory manner, but to cite his conscience before the tribunal of God, and when sufficiently convinced of his iniquity, to reflect on the strictness of the sentence pronounced on all sinners. Thus confounded and amazed at his misery, he is prostrated and humbled before God; and, casting away all self-confidence, groans as if given up to final perdition. Then we show that the only haven of safety is in the mercy of God, as manifested in Christ, in whom every part of our salvation is complete. As all mankind are, in the sight of God, lost sinners, we hold that Christ is their only righteousness, since, by His obedience, He has wiped off our transgressions; by His sacrifice, appeased the divine anger.

The Genevan Reformer goes on to ask the Cardinal what problem he has with that. It is probably, says Calvin, that the Reformation way of preaching is not "practical" enough; that it doesn't give people clear directions for daily living and motivate them to a higher life. Nevertheless, the Reformers all believed that the preacher is required to preach the text, not to decide on a topic and look for a text that can be pressed into its service. And the text, said they, was aimed not at offering heroes to emulate (even Jesus), but at proclamation of God's redemptive act in the person and work of the God-Man.

Who couldn't find in Calvin's description of medieval preaching something of the contemporary situation? In many of the church growth contexts, once more the sermon is not given the central place liturgically and the sermon itself often reveals that the speaker is more widely read in marketing surveys, trend analyses, biographies of the rich and famous, "One Hundred & One Sermon Illustrations," and Leadership journal than in the Greek New Testament, hermeneutical aids, and the riches of centuries of theological scholarship. One can often tell when a pastor has just read a powerful book of pop-psychology, Christian personality theories, end-times speculations, moral or political calls to action, or entrepreneurial successes. He has been blown away by some of the insights and has scouted about for a text that can, if read very quickly, lend some divine credibility to something he did not actually get from that text, but from the Christian or secular best-seller's list. "I'm a pastor, not a theologian," they say, in contrast to the classical evangelical notion, inherited from the Reformation, that a pastor was a scholar as well as a preacher.

Good communicators can get away with the lack of content by their witty, anecdotal style, but they are still unfaithful as ministers of the Word, even if they help people and keep folks coming back for more.

The "Christ And..." Syndrome

In C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, the devil's strategy is not to remove Christ altogether from the scene, but to propagate a "Christ And..." religion:

What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of "Christianity And." You know--Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychic Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians, let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian colouring. Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing (Letter XXV).

Today, we see this in terms of Christ and America; Christ and Self-Esteem; Christ and Prosperity; Christ and the Republican or Democratic Party; Christ and End-Time Predictions; Christ and Healing; Christ and Marketing and Church Growth; Christ and Traditional Values, and on we could go, until Christ himself becomes little more than an appendage to a religion that can, after all, get on quite well without him. That is not, of course, to say that the evangelical enterprise could do this without some difficulty. After all, every movement needs a mascot. We say we are Christ-centered, but what was the sermon about last Sunday?

In fact, it is not even enough to preach the centrality of Christ. It is particularly Christ as he is our sacrifice for sin and guarantor of new life because of his resurrection that the Bible makes central in its revelation. After a tragic car accident, Fr. James Feehan, a seasoned Roman Catholic priest in New Zealand, realized afresh the significance of Paul's command to preach Christ and him crucified:

If the pulpit is not committed to this utter centrality of the Cross, then our preaching, however, brilliant, is doomed to sterility and failure. We preach the Christ of the Mount; we preach the Christ of the healing ministry; we preach the Christ of the sublime example; we preach the Christ of the Social Gospel; we preach the Christ of the Resurrection but rarely, if ever, do we preach the Christ of the Cross. We have evaded the very heart of the Christian message. In our preaching we tend to decry the human predicament, the turmoil of our lives, the evil in the world, and we wonder if there is a way out. The Way Out is staring us in the face. It is the Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross (Preaching Christ Crucified: Our Guilty Silence [Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1991], p.19).

In other words, to guard the centrality of Christ in our preaching, it is necessary to guard the centrality of Christ's ministry as prophet, priest and king. Otherwise, we will even use "Christ" as a means of preaching something other than Christ. We will insist that we are preaching Christ even though we are really only using his name in vain as a buttress for some fashionable tangent we happen to be on this week.

What then is the proper method for reading, preaching, and interpreting God's Word? Many resist the idea that there is a proper method at all, dismissing it as naive. The content is normative and unchanging, they say, but the method is relative and depends on what works best for each pastor. It is often treated as a matter of style, like whether one wears robes or has the choir in the front or the back of the church. But not only does the Bible give us the content of what we are to believe; it gives us a method for properly determining that message.