

With the expanding influence of Liberalism in the 19th century, and of the Church Growth Movement in the 20th, one might well appreciate the need for a call to restore gospel preaching in our day. This paper, however, seeks to go further than just that and address this same need within even conservative church circles, including those of us who see ourselves as historically Reformed and Presbyterian. It is too easy for all of us, regardless of our background, to get caught up (as did the Pharisees of old) in ethnic traditions, denominational practices and what we see to be our proud inheritance coming out of all that. And for that very reason, we should regularly step back a bit and re-examine both what we are doing and how we are doing it in the light of Holy Scripture.

I will begin with what I mean by gospel preaching. This is preaching which is God-honouring, Christ-centred, Spirit-directed and therefore thoroughly biblical. There are other distinctive attributes which might be mentioned also, but these are the core features of the most faithful and spiritually enriching preaching, and we must not lose sight of them nor fail to employ them. By “God-honouring” preaching I am referring to proclaiming the Word of God in a way which is most honouring to God the Father. This, then, is preaching which requires a clear and determined focus on, and which calls for an unwavering commitment to, His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, unto whom He has given all authority and power. If Christ Himself, the object of the Father’s own delight and good pleasure, is not the focus and emphasis of our preaching, we may be sure that we are not really and truly honouring God the Father who sent His Son into the world to save lost souls as we should be (John 5:22,23; 14:6; Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 1:1-4).

By “Christ-centred” preaching what I mean is perhaps self-explanatory. This preaching presents an extensive and in-depth examination of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, specifically, and of everything in the Bible that directs us to Him. It includes calling sinners to seek refuge in Christ, exhorting Christians to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ – as well as spelling out every reason for their doing so – but even in all this the principle thrust and essential focus of the message is to be the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and all that God the Father is pleased to give His people in Him (John 3:35,36; 1 Cor. 1:22-2:2; Heb. 12:1,2).

It is true that we live in an age of countless 'how to' sermons. There is a focus in that kind of preaching on law-keeping, and too often on man-made rules and regulations to replace God's law. Preachers are constantly telling their hearers what it is they need to do, and how to do it, in order to be happy and to have a purpose-driven life. I have even heard sermons which some might think to be Christ-centred, but were really more man-centred than perhaps even the preacher himself was aware, yet, having so emphasized what it is we need to do to press on and be perfected in Christ Jesus, he told us little or nothing of Christ Himself. It is as if the law will do more to drive us to Christ than the gospel could ever do in drawing us to Him. I am not suggesting that we ignore the Law of God, but if we do all that God requires of us through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13), if that is the means of our keeping the law, then it is only by our looking to Christ, by our fastening our attention on Him and what we learn about Him, that we will begin and continue to fulfill the law in a manner that is pleasing to our Lawmaker.

By "Spirit-directed" preaching, let me draw your attention to the fact that it was the Holy Spirit who gave us the sacred writings of the Old and New Testament in the first place, who inspired the prophets and apostles to write down what we need to be complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work, and so these are the very scriptures that we must preach. Our exhortations are to honour the principles of both *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *tota scriptura* (all Scripture).

The first of these (*sola scriptura*) means that we are not to preach from any other book than the Bible itself, not even from the Three Forms of Unity or the Westminster Standards. As much as we may appreciate the brevity and clarity of these confessional statements, the Bible is still the only infallible rule of faith and practice. And despite the temptation to do so, we are not to preach our own ideas either as if we imagine them to have, or even just wish them to have, biblical support.

The second of these (*tota scriptura*) means that we are to preach from the whole Bible, both Old and New Testament alike, and not back away from any passage. There are those who tell us that Jesus of Nazareth was unknown prior to His birth in Bethlehem, and that Christ-centred preaching is therefore impossible from the Old Testament, but that is not true (Luke 24:27; John 8:56). "Christ was the substance of every Old Testament sacrifice ordained in the Law of Moses. Christ

was the true Deliverer and King of whom all the judges and deliverers in Jewish history were types. Christ was the coming Prophet greater than Moses, whose glorious coming filled the pages of the prophets. Christ was the true Seed of the woman who was to bruise the serpent's head, the true Shiloh to whom the people were to be gathered, the true Scapegoat, the true bronze Serpent, the true Lamb to which every daily offering pointed, the true High Priest of whom every descendant of Aaron was a figure" (J.C.Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*). The whole Bible is about the Lord Jesus Christ, in other words, and so failing to preach from any part of it is to neglect – or, even worse, to dismiss – what the Lord our God has revealed about Him for our spiritual wellbeing and to His own eternal praise.

All these scriptures are what the Holy Spirit has given to be used in preaching to draw and bind sinners to Christ, to equip and sanctify believers that they may grow in faith from strength to strength, and so learn more and more from walking with the Lord Jesus what it is to be conformed to His glorious image. As the Father sent His Son into the world, so have Father and Son together sent the Holy Spirit among us – but to do what? – to testify of the Son, to bear witness of the Lord Jesus Christ upon the hearts of His people, to help them in all their weaknesses to grow up and come to greater maturity in Him (John 15:26; Rom. 8:14-17; 8:26,27). Notice once again, therefore, and with all three Persons of the Holy Trinity we see this same thing, that the focus of our attention in preaching is to be Christ Jesus Himself (Col. 2:8-10; 2 Pet. 3:17,18).

It must also be pointed out, however, that gospel preaching requires the full scope of that message, not just the preferred parts (what comes to us most easily and without much effort), or what we think may be most appealing to our listeners, but everything God has revealed to us in His Word. This includes dire warnings to unbelievers of God's wrath and the gentle assurance that the free offer of Christ in the gospel is also for them (Is. 55:6,7; Rom. 10:12,13). It includes frequent declarations of the joy and peace and comfort of the Lord's great and precious promises to believers and of the hope of their living in His glorious presence forever (Matt. 11:28-30; Rom. 8:28-39). It includes thoughtful and timely rebukes of the careless, helpful encouragements of the weak and vulnerable, the gentle and loving instruction of young children as well as the patient reminders of God's faithfulness to the old and feeble. We must be careful in our understanding of

each passage, of course, comparing scripture with scripture, but, like the apostle Paul before us, we are not to shun preaching the whole counsel of God, holding forth whatever is needed to be addressed in all the situations confronting us.

There is yet another factor to be considered in all this. One who is called and equipped of the Lord to proclaim the Word of Life is to recognize that he is not alone in doing so. It is Christ Himself who preaches through him, who opens up the Word by him, who opens up, in turn, the minds and hearts of men to receive that Word, and who achieves by means of it everything He, the living Word, has determined to accomplish, whether it is believed or not, so that it never returns to Him void (Is. 55:11; Matt. 11:27; 1 Pet. 3:18-20). This is an awesome responsibility that is placed on the shoulders of any preacher, to have the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth preaching through him, and it is also very humbling. If someone is commissioned to preach, but is not conscious of this responsibility (or does not care to take it seriously), he should not dare to open his mouth.

The fact that Christ is preaching through us means that we are not only to teach doctrine, and frequently remind our listeners of things they may have forgotten, but we are to exercise calling as well. Many of the people in our churches may be believers, but there may well be several unbelievers present, too, and they should not be neglected in our preaching. And what about the children of believers? We may not always know where such young souls stand before the Lord, but let us call them boldly and freely to Christ as well. In the words of George Frederick Root,

“Come to the Saviour, make no delay;
Here in His word He has shown us the way;
Here in our midst He is standing today,
Tenderly saying, ‘Come!’”

We find this charge to come in the Old Testament (Is. 45:22; 55:1-7). We find it in the New Testament (Matt 11:28-30; 2 Cor. 5:20-6:2).

Such calling is too seldomly heard today, but, if Jesus called sinners to Himself when He dwelt among us, and if He is now the One preaching through us as we stand to declare these unsearchable riches of Christ in our own day, shall we not employ this same language and urgency in reaching out to them now?

Rev. 22, the final chapter of the New Testament, is about the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. In v. 17 we read, “And the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) and the bride (the bride to be, that is the Church) say, ‘Come!’” But it does not end there. It goes on to say, “And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.” Clearly, this is not in reference to the coming again of Christ, but a call to sinners to come to Christ until then. This is to be the message of the Church, calling all the world to Christ, until the Saviour Himself returns on the clouds of glory. The Lord has promised that whoever so commits all that he is and has to Christ shall be saved (Rom. 10:13). Is that not a great incentive, therefore, to call sinners to Him? And is it not a great incentive for sinners, in turn, to respond to that call when they hear it?

Let us exercise such calling, too, not only for the sake of unbelievers who are present, but for the benefit of weak and wandering believers, insisting that every Christian is to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. We all need to hear that. We are not already perfected, and we must therefore impress upon every Christian his need to discipline himself, to press ahead toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let the preaching focus on Christ, first and foremost, on who He is and what He has done – let it expound His attributes, what it is that He does for His people in a most winsome and compelling way – but let it also be marinated with passionate pleas to come, to commit everything to Christ, “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:1,2; see also Jn. 15:1-8).

Preaching today tends to be bland, is intended to be informative, perhaps, but is too soft and easy to stir anyone to do anything. It needs, rather, to **incite** the hearers to action, not simply give them further **insight** of knowledge. Preaching of this kind is not always easy. It requires courage, compassion for souls, consistency of focus, and it must be steeped in fervent and persistent prayer. Yet, if we are to serve the Lord faithfully in this role, how can we offer Him anything less?

Final Note: It can be most helpful for young pastors to study some of the greatest preachers of the past, and the following are highly recommended: The sermons of George Whitefield. (18th century), Charles Spurgeon (19th century) and Martyn Lloyd-Jones (20th century).