



## Profiting from preaching

The prominence given to preaching in our congregations is a testimony to our conviction that the proclamation of the Word of God is primary in the church. Israel's greatest privilege as a nation in covenant with God was that *"the oracles of God"* were entrusted to them (Romans 3:2) as the chief means of making them wise unto salvation (cf. Deuteronomy 4:1-8). In the same way the greatest privilege the church has is to teach and proclaim the completed canon of Scripture as the chief means of drawing people to Christ.

*"It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe"* (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Whenever preaching has been esteemed by both preacher and hearer great blessing has followed.

It is out of concern for the hearers of preaching that this article is written. Books about preaching abound, as do volumes of sermons. And oddly enough, criticisms of preaching seem to abound even more! But, little has been written to help the people in the pew to understand and appreciate better what comes forth from the pulpit. I trust that these thoughts, submitted from the perspective of a pastor who hues the work of preaching, will help the reader to profit from the preaching of the Word of God in his or her congregation.

### The act of preaching

The act of preaching is of an order different from all other public speaking. The nearest earthly comparison would be the work of a national ambassador. The minister of the gospel is an ambassador of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20b). While all Christians are like tourists representing the kingdom of God to the kingdoms of this world, the preacher officially represents Christ the King in both his life and ministry. Like an earthly ambassador he must rightly represent the words of his chief of state. But, even more, he has a life-and-death earnestness that the message of his King which he proclaims be believed and obeyed by his hearers. In a mysterious and glorious way the perfect God pleads through an imperfect preacher, imploring (literally, "begging") sinners to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20b). There is simply no other earthly activity which can compare to this! It is, to use the popular exclamation, *awesome* to realize that the reigning Christ attests his kingship, heralds his promises, thunders his warnings and displays his love through the act of preaching.

When hearers of preaching grasp this truth, a revolution takes place in their attitude: "The risen Christ, who promises to build his church (Matthews 16:18), has commissioned our minister to bring his Word to us in all of our sin and need. Indeed, Christ himself declares his name to us in the act of preaching (cf. Hebrews 2:12). Is there any doubt that I will be present to hear God's Word Sunday morning and Sunday evening?"

*"Preaching is the public exposition of Scripture by the man sent from God, in which God himself is present in judgment and grace,"* wrote John Calvin.

That biblical view of preaching should, alone, stir preachers to take their preaching far more seriously, and congregations to do the same.

## The art of preaching

As divine an act as preaching is, it still remains a very human activity. Preaching, like the preacher, is treasure in an earthen vessel (2 Corinthians 4:7). There is an art to preaching which must be developed over time. The preacher must handle the word of truth accurately (2 Timothy 2:15), studying, preparing and preaching under the sanction against adding to or taking away from the Word of God (Deuteronomy 4:2, Revelation 22:18f.). He must not shun to declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), always keeping in mind the capacity of his hearers. God has called him to feed sheep, not giraffes! Both milk and meat must be offered from the table of his preaching at all times, because in the normal congregation both babes and mature Christians will always be present (1 Peter 2:2, Hebrews 5:12-14). Through the use of the principles of good communication he must organize, illustrate, and present the message of Scripture in such a way that it can be said of him as it was said of his Master, "*the common people heard him gladly*" (Mark 12:37). In short, the minister must prepare and preach with one eye on his congregation and one eye on his God. That is a tall order to fill week by week!

Hearers of preaching do well to keep these things in mind as they sit under the teaching of the minister Christ has commissioned for them. How does he help you understand a passage of Scripture that is no doubt far more complex than you thought at first? What is his intention in this particular sermon? What does he want you to do? How does he want you to change your thinking and your attitudes? What devices has he used to make the content clear and memorable? Any preacher who is worth his salt will ask these questions of himself as he prepares to preach. Hearers can profit from preaching if they, too, ask such questions and honestly seek the answers when they sit under the Word of God ministered to them. The Lord Jesus warned rightly, "*Take heed how you hear*" (Luke 8:18).

## Responding to preaching

We take too little stock of the fact that preaching times are battle times. The human heart, even the heart renewed by grace, bristles at authoritative deliverances from God and is full of all kinds of devices to blunt the edge of God's sword wielded through his minister (Jeremiah 17:9). Satan is terribly active to devour the seeds of God's Word sown in hearts (Matthews 13:19). And how the powerful influence of the world works to crowd out or quench the influence of the Spirit working by the Word! Fear of persecution challenges the call to obedience (Matthews 13:21). The cares of the world will draw the mind from hearing the message burning in the bones of the preacher (Matthews 13:22). Ministers, for their part, make the enemy's battle easier by failing to take into account the warfare aspect of preaching. Hearers of preaching just as often forget the battle that occurs under preaching. As a result we too infrequently see, as we would like, victories for the kingdom of God won by the King who does battle by his own Word (Revelation 19:15).

For these reasons the Scriptures are rich with exhortations to help hearers profit from preaching. "*Gird up the loins of your mind*" (1 Peter 1:13) is a call to make your renewed mind ready for hard work in every area of the Christian life, not least when sitting under the preaching and teaching of the Word of God which is designed to renew your mind.

*"Break up your fallow ground...circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your hearts"* (Jeremiah 4:3, 4) is a call as applicable today as it was in Jeremiah's day.

More hearers of preaching than we would like to admit are in need of new hearts, that they might stop resisting Christ and surrender to him in meek, childlike, obedient faith. The call to be a doer of the Word and not a forgetful hearer (James 1:22-25) is a sobering rebuke to the mindset that is satisfied with simply listening to preaching and then dissecting it over the Sunday meal. If we would be saved under preaching (and that is the goal of true preaching) we must "*receive with meekness the implanted word*" (James 1:21). That challenges us to prepare by prayer, by careful organization of our schedules and by self-discipline to sit under preaching ready to respond as God commands.

## Helping preaching

Do we overlook the responsibility of preachers to make their sermons the best instruments possible? Not at all! Preachers need to apply themselves to this, their primary task, *"giving themselves entirely to it, that their progress may be evident to all"* (1 Timothy 4:15). Can members of a congregation actually be of help to their minister as he labors to improve his preaching? Much in every way!

- **First**, pray for your minister. *"Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel...as I ought to speak"* (Ephesians 6:18-20).  
If every criticism of preachers and their preaching were changed to prayer for preachers and their preaching we would be blessed with expositors like John Calvin, evangelists like George Whitefield and orators like Charles Spurgeon in all of our pulpits! A sensitive preacher can tell very quickly if his congregation has helped in his preparation by praying for him.
- **Second**, offer appreciation to your minister. "Great sermon today" is not nearly as helpful as "I so appreciated the way you clarified that passage of Scripture." Or, "That illustration really impressed the whole message on my heart." Maybe, "I'm thankful you weren't afraid to make that application. I want to work on that matter in our family life." Encouraging your minister is the best means of helping him improve his preaching. He, too, needs the encouraging ministry of the Holy Spirit, and you are the primary agents of that ministry.
- **Third**, offer suggestions in a spirit of love. "I wish you wouldn't preach so long" only wounds the sensitive preacher. 20-minute sermons would have been an insult in previous years when preaching was esteemed as the very voice of God to his people. Far better to say: "This material is so important. Do you think it would be better to present it in more bite-sized pieces? I'd like to chew on it a little longer." If your pastor's preaching is so poor that it is a dishonor to Christ, the session should deal with the matter with loving boldness. But, if your pastor's flaws as a preacher are greatly outweighed by his desire to be faithful to the Scriptures and to the souls of his flock, then be careful that your criticisms serve only to help him on his way of being an even more effective herald of the gospel.

*"There cannot be a greater jewel in a Christian commonwealth than an earnest, faithful, and constant preacher of the Lord's Word,"* remarked a recent writer.

May the Lord of the Word use the thoughts given above, help us all profit better from the Word of God preached by the men commissioned by Christ to do that most glorious of work in our midst from week to week.

W Shishko

© 2011  
[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)