



The whole counsel of God

One contemporary trend of the pulpit is to distinguish between 'teaching' and 'preaching'. On the basis of this distinction it is argued that the pulpit is the place for the bold and persuasive declaration of God's saving gospel. Formal instruction in deep things of the faith, however, is to be removed from the pulpit and relegated to adult Christian education programmes.

Such a distinction and its fruits has become deeply rooted even among people regarding themselves as evangelical and Biblical Christians. It is to be seen in the context of a modern aversion for detailed, deep and comprehensive study of the Scriptures and doctrine. Instead, the disposition of our times is for pre-packaged and easily digested presentations of the faith which demand little of the believer apart from ready conformity.

This preaching/teaching distinction can be examined by the Biblical contrast between milk and meat (1 Corinthians 3:2). Hebrews 6 identifies *'the elementary teachings about Christ'* in terms of repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection and judgement. But contrary to the passage's exhortation to go on to maturity of knowledge, the modern preacher defines his task as serving milk not meat. Obviously the milk of God's saving gospel must be served to those unfamiliar with it and unable to digest the meat of weightier teaching. There is a big difference, however, between serving milk at an appropriate stage and making it the permanent diet.

Worse still, a congregation fed only milk soon tires and greets sermons with inattention. Desperate to regain his congregation, the preacher resorts to serving up a milkshake in which artificial flavouring, froth and bubble soon overtake the milk in importance. Thus the sermon ends not even proclaiming the elemental doctrines of the faith and having only a catchy introduction, amusing anecdotes and snappy slogans.

The consequences of milky preaching

1. Malnutrition

Milk fills the stomach for a time, but it neither satisfies for long nor nourishes for growth. How sad it is to see Christians rushing from one venue to another, seeking yet another 'inspirational' message to top up their soul; yet all the time neglecting the meaty teaching which alone satisfies.

2. Vulnerability

Milky preaching produces vulnerable Christians who are unable to distinguish true from false teaching and thus are liable to be swept away by falsehood in various forms. Timothy's church at Ephesus was evidently battered by false teachers with sufficient appearance of orthodoxy to deceive believers. Note the antidote prescribed: regular teaching of the true faith (e.g. 1 Timothy 4:6-13). When confronted by the inroads of false teaching, the milky preacher has little alternative but to press the panic button and launch out to regain an already beguiled congregation. Regular and systematic exposition of the whole body of God's truth provides an effective defence against the false teacher ever gaining an audience.

3. Ineffective witness

One responsibility of all believers is to articulate their faith and defend it against other systems of belief, that is, to engage in evangelism and apologetics (1 Peter 3:15). The milk-fed Christian is ill-equipped for this, being able only to recite his basic gospel formula, and leave many questions unanswered. If Christians are to present their faith intelligently to a critical world, they need a deep grasp of its first principles and farthest implications. Meaty teaching alone supplies this.

4. *Priestly dependency*

It is not just the modern church which distinguishes between teaching and preaching. Medieval thinkers similarly distinguished between logic and rhetoric. Logic concerned itself with truth and supposedly busied itself with the depths of doctrine. But logic was not for all, only for the professional theologians. Thus the bulk of God's people were given only rhetoric — sermons full of moralizing exhortations and priestly imperatives, but devoid of maturity-promoting knowledge.

The result of this is congregations dependent on directives from spiritual gurus and unable to think out faith's applications to life. By again creating a scholastic priesthood, the modern preacher deprives his congregation of that full knowledge of God's truth which is vital for each to work out his salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).

5. *Unsatisfied minds*

God designed mankind to think and speak at a complex level. A basic human need is for an orderly, consistent and comprehensive world view. As given in Scripture, God's truth supplies this need and gives that mental perspective needed to make sense of reality. There is sufficient in Christian truth to occupy and satisfy the most searching intellect ... but that truth must be presented in its fullness. One wonders if the massive drop-out of tertiary students from churches would be lessened if they had received more meaty teaching, thus being enabled to see the intellectual integrity of Christianity.

6. *Closed Bibles*

In the Scriptures, God has provided a sharp, two-edged sword as a powerful weapon in the warfare of daily life (Hebrews 4:12). Over all its parts, the Scriptures provide all things useful — yet many Christians are able to use only parts of the Bible and poorly so at that. Meaty teaching is needed to help believers become familiar with their whole Bible and able to use it soundly. Constant preaching on a few basic verses does not set a good model of Bible use or build interpretive skills.

7. *Untaught Christians*

Defenders of the distinction between preaching and teaching may argue that the above points are irrelevant on the ground that meaty teaching can be given in a programme of Christian education. On this model, the whole church has formal instruction via books, talks, discussions and so forth in the classroom. The Sunday sermons complement this teaching with challenging exhortations to accept and live under the gospel.

Now it is undeniable that scope exists for much teaching outside the sermon and any such opportunity is to be welcomed. Nevertheless, it is a fact that many even well educated Christians are so caught up in other responsibilities and so disinclined to be taught, that they are unable or unwilling to take up these opportunities. For many Christians the Sunday sermon is their only source of systematic instruction. Preachers do well to recognize this lamentable fact and respond to it by using the pulpit for teaching. Our Christian education programmes touch only a fragment of God's people and woe betide the church which confines teaching to this one channel.

God's better way

The above arguments show the futility of banishing meaty teaching from the pulpit and leaving only elementary preaching. The Scriptures give a better way of teaching the whole congregation the whole of God's truth.

God's will is for maturity in His people as they advance beyond basic teachings to full knowledge (Hebrews 6:1). Maturity is defined in Ephesians 4 as likeness to Christ (v.13) and the means to it defined as '*knowledge of the Son of God*'. That is, God's redeemed people are to grow into His likeness by receiving, digesting and acting on the knowledge He has revealed.

To facilitate this learning, God has appointed teachers in His church. While the whole eldership must be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2), some (like Timothy) are to be especially given to this task so

that it becomes their chief ministry (1 Timothy 5:17, 4:11-14). The critical questions are: when do they teach? and, what do they teach?

What is to be taught?

Deuteronomy 29:29 reminds us that God has not given an exhaustive revelation of Himself in Scripture, for there are many things yet hidden from our eyes. Nevertheless, the whole of those things revealed are ours to learn and act on. Nothing in God's truth is unnecessary, unteachable or irrelevant. 2 Timothy 3:16 makes the same point in asserting that *'all Scripture is God breathed and useful...'* Note the emphasis: nothing in the Bible is to be dismissed as irrelevant to all believers and left for the theologian alone to ponder.

God's truth stands as a unity, with its component parts being analogous to the pieces of a jigsaw. Only when all pieces are present is the whole complete and in proper balance. The preacher may be tempted to present only those truths of apparent relevance to his congregation, but before long he, and they, will discover that God's truth cannot be compartmentalized.

And so to Paul at Ephesus. Paul's great work was to be a pioneer evangelist who preached the gospel, planted churches and helped them to grow. Surely this is a case for the preacher restricting himself to the elemental truths so that his congregations would be well grounded! No indeed! When addressing the Ephesian elders after the end of his three years ministry among them, Paul declared,

'You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you.'

(Acts 20:20)

Thus he had spoken to Jews and Greeks of their need for repentance (v.21). But the message of this pioneering evangelist in his three-years ministry had gone further to embrace *'the whole counsel of God'* (v.27). There we have it: even a congregation in its infancy is to be given the whole truth of God. The meat is to be served to all.

The meaty preacher will dig into the whole of the Scriptures. He will expound the Old Testament laws and histories as well as the prophets. His congregation will hear from Song of Songs in addition to Psalms. Their Bibles will be open at the Epistles as well as the Gospels. They will learn from Revelation as well as Romans. Many preachers will find it helpful to expound Old and New Testament books successively to their congregations, as such a programme ensures a balanced and full diet.

Nor will the meaty preacher neglect systematic doctrine, even though his aim is to expound Scripture passages. Every passage contains doctrines directly or by implication, and the wise preacher will not shirk them. Nor will he fail to set a particular passage and its doctrines in the broad context of God's whole truth. Thus his congregation will learn a systematic theology and be able to think as Christians in an ordered framework.

Naturally such meaty expository and doctrinal preaching will be accompanied by a lively presentation and relevant applications. A good cook presents a steak attractively and does not simply throw it before the diner as an indigestible lump. But the steak must be there — and the meaty preacher will not be so enamoured of the fad for relevance that he goes straight to application without following the Scriptural example by first laying an expository and doctrinal foundation.

When do we teach?

The remaining question is to identify the venue for such teaching. Is the pulpit for preaching and the classroom alone for instruction?

Let us first recognize that there is a distinction between gospel preaching to the unconverted and teaching given to believers. They presuppose a different purpose and to some extent have a different content. That being said, it should be noted that any part of God's truth can be used in

conversion and that no preacher should assume that the whole of his regular Sunday congregation is converted. Thus, we should not distinguish too sharply between special evangelistic preaching and the regular sermon.

Nevertheless, it is useful to ask whom the preacher speaks to in his sermons and what his purpose is. Should he assume an unconverted audience and hence preach the gospel basics repeatedly, never advancing beyond the milk? More likely, he speaks to the regularly gathered people of God who are citizens of His glorious Kingdom. Such people need meat to nourish for growth, not the precious saving message given over and over again.

The regular Sunday congregation is thus more analogous to the believers mentioned in Acts 2:42-47 than the unbelievers in vv.5-41. To the latter group, evangelistic preaching was their great need. But once converted their need had changed to teaching. Thus the apostles instructed them, in the manner of Paul in his later ministry at Ephesus. Should not the Sunday sermon likewise instruct in the whole counsel of God?

Part of our modern problem may arise from the word 'preaching' as applied to the sermon. Because we speak of 'preaching the gospel' we may think it desirable to confine ourselves to an evangelistic message. More widely considered, the word includes any persuasive, applied and life-changing communication of God's truth. As such it includes teaching; meat as well as milk.

Thus I plead for the Sunday sermon to be seen as a teaching venue and that the teaching embrace the whole counsel of God. Such teaching will not be without its evangelistic thrust and will be designed to change lives — for it is still preaching and not classroom instruction. However, such regular preaching will teach the whole counsel of God in an orderly, detailed and comprehensive manner.

Does such preaching work?

It is somewhat crude and faithless to ask such a question, for if Scripture commends such teaching it will certainly do so. Nevertheless, some preachers will hesitate before such a teaching programme, awed by the outward 'success' of the popular preacher and confused by the textbooks which give recipes for milkshakes alone and warn against the old diet of meaty preaching.

Be encouraged: such teaching is the way of the God who has revealed His will that believers should be brought to maturity. The same God has promised that His Word does not return empty-handed but accomplishes His purposes (Isaiah 55:11). The teaching preacher may lack the immediate glamour of his popular brother, but his work is faithful to God and has a lasting quality. How assuring to face the Judge with such a work of gold! (1 Corinthians 3:12).

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