



Pulpit Power

Appreciation for the pulpit

Anyone observing our life as Canadian Reformed churches will quickly become aware of the importance placed on the pulpit. This is because of the activity that takes place from the pulpit, that is, the preaching of the gospel. The pulpit is the focal point of our church auditoriums. It is also the focal point of the annual church budget, for the largest part of the budget will be taken up by financial provisions for a minister. Another indicator of its importance is how vacant churches give diligent attention to finding a new minister to fill the pulpit. It is further reinforced by the willingness to contribute a significant sum each year to the operation of the Seminary in Hamilton, where men may receive training for the ministry of the gospel. All this is an indication of the recognition of the importance of the pulpit in the life of the congregation.

Lurking danger around the pulpit

As good as all this attention on the pulpit is, there is a great danger lurking in the wings. That danger is a subtle shift from the *message* that is heard from the pulpit to the *messenger* who stands on the pulpit.

The seeds for this may already have been laid in the calling process where there was more attention given to various characteristics, traits, and abilities of the messenger rather than simply to the faithfulness with which he brings the message. It is not unheard of that vacant congregations send around surveys asking the members as to what type of minister they would like. The goal is to find the right person to deal with the various situations in the congregation. One of the consequences of this will often be the search for a man with experience in the ministry. Churches may think that their situation is just too complex to entrust to someone just out of seminary. When a call is issued, there will be high expectations of the minister, that he will be able to address all the problems facing the congregation.

Note how the focus falls on the messenger. There are great expectations which can also set the stage for great disappointments.

The danger is not only on the side of the congregation. There is also a great danger for the minister, especially when he is the first to be called in a vacancy or when he seems to be desired by so many congregations. The confidence shown in him as messenger may rub off on him so that he forgets for a moment that, ultimately, it is not the messenger that is the power of the pulpit but the message.

Scriptural sobriety

The sobering lesson from the Scriptures is that the *message* is the power of the pulpit. The Lord Jesus indicated that in the parable of the sower. The seed is the Word and that will bear fruit. He sent his disciples into the world with the command to make disciples by baptizing and teaching.

We also receive much sobering instruction from the Apostle Paul. In his first letter to the Corinthians he addressed a situation of people placing their trust in various leaders. We read in the opening chapter how some claimed to belong to Paul, others to Peter or Apollos, while some said they belonged to Christ. It was not the case that any of these leaders put himself on a pedestal, rather, the members of the church did.

In response, Paul stressed that these men were merely servants. It is the message of the cross, he wrote, that is the power of God unto salvation (1 Cor 1:18). In chapter 2 he wrote about his own ministry, saying,

"My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."

(1 Cor 2:4, 5)

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul describes himself and others as God's fellow workers in God's field. Paul planted the seed, a person like Apollos watered, but "God made it grow."

In his second letter to the Corinthians, where he had to make a further defense of his apostolic ministry, Paul wrote, *"For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."* A little further he wrote, *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us"* (2 Cor 4:5, 7). Paul had to impress upon his readers that it was not about the messengers but the message. The Word of God is the seed of regeneration.

It is also possible for too low a view of the messenger to get in the way of the gospel. We see this in Paul's words to Timothy, *"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young"* (1 Tim 4:12). This is the "experience" angle. In our days we might look down on one who has little or no experience in the ministry. This is always a challenge with respect to candidates.

The thought might arise, "But he is too young. He needs some life experience." This view also places the trust in the messenger, as if he has to do it by himself. By preserving Paul's encouragement to Timothy, the Spirit instructs us to be focused on the message and not the messenger. That's where the power lies. Paul's advice to Timothy was, *"Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching"* (1 Tim 4:13). He also urged Timothy to adorn his ministry in Ephesus with a godly life. This advice is reinforced in his second letter to Timothy when he directs Timothy to the inspired Scriptures which are *"God breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"* (2 Tim 3:16, 17). He followed this through with the exhortation to *"Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season, correct, rebuke and encourage..."* (2 Tim 4:2).

We can also think of other passages that show the power of the pulpit is the Word. In the letter to the Hebrews, the author wrote,

"For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

(Heb 4:12)

James wrote that God *"chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created"* (James 1:18). Peter wrote that his readers had been *"born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God ... and this is the word that was preached to you"* (1 Pet 1:23-25).

Implications

Since the power of the pulpit is the message of the gospel there is, therefore, the need to focus on the message, not the messenger. The man in the pulpit is simply the instrument. To be sure, the messenger must always do his best. He must utilize all the talent the Spirit has given him to fulfill his task but, ultimately, he is not the power of the pulpit. Therefore, the messenger must not get in the way of the message.

It is the reality of life that the messenger will draw attention to himself even without trying. Every person has his own personality traits that will either enamor or irritate others. A minister, for

example, may be thought of as speaking too slowly, too fast, moving his arms too much or not enough, saying certain words in a peculiar way, having his hair too short, too long, and who knows what else. It may all be very superficial, but these can detract people from the message. When one considers the incidental ways a minister can get in the way of the message without even trying or being aware of it, it is all the more important not to go out and make an effort to get in the way, for example by cleverness and innovation. The challenge for the messenger is that, despite being very visible due to his task, he must, in a manner of speaking, be invisible. The message is the power of the pulpit.

At the same time, it is also important that all those listening do not let the messenger get in the way but focus on the message. That means looking past the person and his personality. It means talking about what he said, not how he said it. For example, how easily does it not happen that a discussion about the message quickly turns to a discussion about the messenger? It can happen on Sunday, over coffee. It can happen at family visits, when the elders ask about the impact the preaching has in someone's life. It takes great effort by an elder to keep the discussion from being about the preacher. He wants to hear what effect the preaching has on the heart, which way the sword of the Word is cutting.

There are also implications for churches seeking to fill a vacancy. No messenger can solve problems. It is the message that does it. The message either heals or flushes out hardening of heart. Each church needs its own minister who can be busy with the Word in the particular setting of that congregation. As the minister studies the Word in the congregation and preaches it, the Spirit will accomplish his work of regeneration and sanctification.

A faith view of the pulpit

When we look at the place of the pulpit in faith, we will know not to look down on the messenger because he is young, nor to look up to him because he is experienced. Every messenger is no more than a jar of clay beneath whatever fancy glaze may be on him. The power of the pulpit is the message brought in these jars of clay *"to show that this all-surpassing power is from God."*

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