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Reformation
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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
 2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.
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Information

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in this country, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide* is needed in our generation.

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In correcting an overly charismatic and triumphalistic congregation in ancient Corinth the Apostle Paul exhorted the church to recover its confidence in the preaching of the cross of Christ. He wrote:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:17-18).

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He adds, several verses later:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those to whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (vv. 22-24).

It was with preaching that Paul came to minister in pagan Corinth. It was with preaching that he ministered to cultured Greek despisers and religious, sign-demanding Jews. He affirmed that “his message and preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (2:3).

Most of us are well aware that preaching has been under serious attack for several decades. This attack comes from social scientists who insist that one-way, monological, verbal communication is ineffective. People simply do not learn best this way. Further, the attack comes from those who believe that people discover truth best when they find it on their own without someone “*preaching* to them.” Still others attack preaching, in far more subtle ways, by insisting that drama, upbeat music and other more visually oriented approaches are better for the church in this age of television.

Indeed, the term *preaching* is often used in a pejorative sense; e.g., "He is always *preaching* at me," or "All he ever does is *preach*." The idea is that preaching is a kind of "put-down" or coward's castle for the authoritarian. (I would not deny that some have abused the ministry of preaching in this and other similar ways.)

Most of our seminaries and Bible colleges put little stress on the value and place of preaching. Homiletics courses are, at best, courses in methodologies that help the minister prepare messages that are often artificial and frequently not genuinely grounded in Scripture. The emphasis in the course requirements of many such schools has shifted in the last few decades to pastoral care. This has a warmer sound to it, thus sounding truly helpful to hurting and broken people. And what pastor is not pressed on every side to devote his largest amount of time to hearing people share their problems privately? Few leaders in the local church have any comprehension of what task faces the shepherd who must stand before the flock week by week and "preach the whole counsel of the Word."

A recent study shows that the sermon which exceeds 15-20 minutes will generally turn people away from the local church. A reporter adds, "The popularity of short sermons is obviously due to the fact that people find most sermons boring. If a sermon is interesting, we will gladly listen for 25-30 minutes." Yet there are congregations, even in the visually oriented West, where people gladly and attentively listen to preaching for 45-60 minutes twice a week and wish for more. Could the real problem be that we who preach have lost our sense of true preaching? Could it be that preachers are not really preaching? And that most of our people have never heard the kind of preaching that came in times of spiritual awakening and wide-scale reformation? Dr. James M. Boice of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, PA., has correctly observed that

the pulpit goes into decline when the preacher substitutes the words "It seems to me" for the majestic and powerful "Thus saith the Lord!" It is with this important distinction and difference in view that this issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal* is prepared.

The simple fact is this: Preaching is being abandoned by the visible church in the West, and the influence in this is spreading to other parts of the kingdom outside the West now. Dialogues, films, talk-ins, drama, mime, up-tempo music, and clever new styles of speaking to the mind of modern man have all vied for first place in the attention of God's people gathered in public worship. We have had lay renewal movements, worship renewal workshops, serendipity sessions and films that will draw the unchurched ad infinitum. The result is that, at best, most churches give their congregation one short sermon weekly. And this sermon is often filled with anecdotes, humorous illustrations, and trivialities beyond imagination in other eras. In American churches the Sunday evening service died long ago in most growing assemblies.

To return to the Apostolic counsel again we saw earlier that Paul insisted on the power and greatness of the message of the cross in correcting the Corinthian church errors. Indeed, one might safely say that the governing principle that Paul puts on the life and ministry of the church is this: the message of the cross preached! But what does he mean by *preach*?

Charles Hodge helpfully answers in his magnificent commentary on First Corinthians:

Preaching, in the scriptural sense of the term, includes the inculcation of the truth, whether to an individual or to a multitude—whether by the road side, or in the school, or lecture-room, or the pulpit.

Its principle aim is to “tell the good news” (Acts 8:35) through oral communication that presents truth to the minds of hearers in such a way as to appeal to them to repent, i.e., to change their direction, alter their course, redirect their lives. Added to this is always the call to faith, or to obedience based upon confidence in the person and promises of God. It seems to me that the written Gospels and apostolic correspondence of the New Testament is also a form of preaching. The central point is that it is truth rationally and plainly put before the mind with a call to act. Both application and persuasion are very much a part of biblical preaching.

To such a ministry Jesus gave Himself. We read in Matthew 4:17 that “From that time on (i.e., following the temptation, which marked the beginning of His public ministry) Jesus began to *preach*, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’” (emphasis mine).

Jesus commissioned the Twelve to preach. In Matthew 10:7 He said to them, “As you go, *preach* the message. . .” (emphasis mine). They were further commissioned to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” Much of the latter was clearly related to the nature of their Apostolic office, but no one doubts that preaching was and continued to be their primary task, even in the midst of authentic miracles. When Peter spoke before Cornelius in Acts 10 he referred to his commission and said, “He commanded us to *preach* to the people and to testify” (v. 42a; emphasis mine).

Preaching was the method Paul used consistently to fulfill his divine calling. Reports concerning this truth were widely known by all. We read in Galatians 1:22-24:

I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: “The man who formerly persecuted us is now *preaching the faith* he once tried to

destroy.” And they praised God because of me (emphasis mine).

And when Paul writes of the great mystery of godliness, he says in 1 Timothy 3:16: “He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was *preached among the nations*, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory” (emphasis mine).

Paul tells the Corinthians that he did not use clever human wisdom or the newest styles of Greek persuasion technique when he was in their presence. Nor did he engage in the admixture of Christian theology with pagan philosophy and its newest trends and contributions. The reason he offers is very straightforward: “lest the cross be emptied of its power” (1:17b).

We can see, quite plainly, that preaching was central. Even the sacrament of baptism was not of *equal* importance in the ministry of Paul. He begins this section of Corinthians referring to his actual administration of the water rite and then says, “For Christ did not send me (i.e., commission me!) to baptize, *but to preach*. . .” (1:17a; emphasis mine). Note, please, the sharp contrast and placement of the conjunction in Paul’s language. He wanted his reader to understand that preaching was *more important* than baptism, which was a command of Jesus given to the church for all the ages (Matt. 28:18-20).

These observations bring us back to the need of our day. I believe that a whole generation of Christian churchgoers has been fed a diet so malnourished by the lack of theological truth from Scripture that they do not recognize solid preaching when they do occasionally hear it. Should the minister, in such a time in church history, recognize this and give up? Or should he major on his pulpit ministry and seek recovery and solid reformation? This is not as easy to deal with as some may believe. Even godly Christians are

weariness of much of what they have heard. They find Bible study groups and discussions far more satisfying than what they have heard from the pulpit. And should the minister decide to give it to them as if they were a 17th-century congregation he will not have much of a church left to serve and pastor. Wisdom is needed, but wisdom that seeks recovery knowing that we have a problem, a very serious problem. Unless, or until, God grants true revival, we cannot expect most churches to hear the Word the way they did in such seasons in the past. Yet the only way we can labor for reformation and pray for revival is to major on God's ordained means of ministry—preaching the message of the cross.

It is of great concern to those who know the Scriptures well and the history of past awakenings that modern movements emphasizing revival and intercession in the past decade or so have often downplayed preaching. One present movement has featured leaders who openly speak of not preaching in meetings where God is doing great things in reviving people, as if preaching might hinder God's work or stop the praying that is so important. We must be cautiously and tenderly critical of such a direction. We are heartened by news of people praying together earnestly and confessing sin but concerned that doctrinal and passionate preaching attend such. Great citywide concerts of prayer are a wonderful blessing on the whole. What we plead for is this added emphasis which is obviously apostolic.

One needs only consider the direction taken in 1904 in the last great Welsh revival where preaching was out and testimonies and sharing were central. The negative results were catastrophic in the long run! The enemy sowed problems and heresies everywhere, and the revival showers ran off the land with few deep places for them to gather and have long term benefit. If we do not recover strong preaching, along with movements of prayer, we will simply go further

into mystical Christianity and into new depths of revivalistic error.

Let me be as clear as possible on this matter. We need study groups, discussion times, prayer cells, even well-produced and directed films. These tools are being used with genuine profit by many who are not compromised in the area of truth. The central question is this: "Should these tools, or any others, replace preaching as the *central* work of the minister of God in leading, guarding, guiding, and caring for the church of God?" What is indispensable in corporate worship? What has God ordained? Does it matter? These are the questions we must ask.

But on what basis do I continue to argue that preaching is so critical, so central? I answer with Paul:

For "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then, can they call on the One they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom. 10:13-15).

And Paul adds, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ" (10:17). This last phrase is a kind of terse statement for preaching. Paul is saying, quite plainly, that preaching Christ is the means by which God brings faith to hearers. (How I wish we who preach *really* believed this!)

In Acts 6 we find a passage that one has called "the blowtorch" when it comes to the matter of anything else replacing preaching as central in the life of the minister and the local church. We read, "So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It is not right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables'" (v. 2).

The Apostles, who were then the spiritual shepherds (serving ministers) of the church in Jerusalem, wanted an important problem to be solved in such a way that they could "give [their] attention to prayer and *the ministry of the word*" (v. 4; emphasis mine). It seems apparent that they saw their central work as praying for the flock and preaching the truth of God to them in every possible way. They did this in public and in private, night and day, and with tears (Acts 20:13-38).

Here the apostles demonstrate that they understood without question that preaching and praying were their supreme tasks. Administrative duties, and quite important ones at that, could not crowd out these two priorities. The modern pastor faces tasks and problems that daily cry out for his attention. He must learn, graciously for sure, but learn, nonetheless, to say "No!"

Our generation has experienced a famine of the Word of God (Amos 8:11), and the people of God need to hear once again a clear sound blown from the trumpet. We who are called to preach as those given "divine orders" have our papers. We must be clear about our Commander's will for us. We must preach! And we must labor for reformation in hearing the Word preached. We must work harder, study more diligently, pray more fervently, and plead with our hearers regarding their right hearing and doing of the Word preached. Better courses in homiletics and better illustrations in our sermons will simply not solve our problem. We need to be focused on our goal and passionate and clear in our presentation of the truth.

We also need more of Christ in our content and the fullness of His Spirit upon our actual delivery of the message. Lloyd-Jones refers to preaching in his masterful work on the subject as "logic on fire." We need rational, clear, biblical thoughts filled with human earnestness and spiritual fire from God. Let us repent of our dull and lifeless preaching and seek God for revival.

Finally, both we and our hearers need to understand what really ought to happen in preaching. John Calvin, the great Protestant reformer of Geneva, himself a marvelous expository preacher, said that "the minister of the gospel is *the mouth of God*" (emphasis mine). He adds, "[God] deigns to consecrate to Himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that His voice may resound in them." If this observation be true, and I believe that it is, then preaching is sobering and awesome business. In the words of Horatius Bonar, "What a mystery! The soul and eternity of one man depends on the voice of another."

We must make sure that what we preach is God's truth. And our hearers must know that they are hearing God's truth, not our opinions. But truthfulness, which is absolutely necessary for people to hear God's voice, is not all. The truth must be presented through human personality, as Phillips Brooks was wont to say. And that personality must be powerfully overshadowed by the Most High. Lloyd-Jones correctly insists:

If there is no power, it is not preaching. True preaching, after all, is God acting. It is not just a man uttering words; it is God using him. He is under the influence of the Holy Spirit; it is what Paul calls in 1 Corinthians 2; "preaching in demonstration of the Spirit and of power"; or as he puts it in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, "our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

Churches in the West need genuine, deep, biblical reformation. They also need a visitation from God, what was called revival in times past. A major component needed as we seek to bring the church back to God and prayerfully urge her to pray for revival is God-centered, powerful preaching. May reformation begin in both pulpit and pew.

And may revival showers fall upon a people who are taught well and prepared for powerful revelations of God's greatness!

John H. Armstrong