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Classical Pastoral Practice for Today:
Preaching and Worship



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The recovery of the idea of worship within evangelical churches during the past twenty years is a cause for real joy. We owe a great deal to the charismatic churches for this. I can remember times within my own tradition (Southern Baptist) where the idea of worship was relegated to the area of "opening exercises," like the welcome offered to visitors and the announcements. The "real thing" was the sermon or "message," or, in some cases, the invitation. This is not to say that all Southern Baptists viewed things in this way or followed this practice. The original *Baptist Hymnal* was organized around a theological and liturgical ideal springing from catholic and reformed principles. But a return to the idea of worship has been a good thing. That the Church gathers primarily for the worship and adoration of our God, rather than for evangelism or even instruction, is so essentially a New Testament idea that it needs no proof.

But, where does preaching fit into this idea? The New Testament speaks of preaching in a variety of contexts. Preaching is for evangelism. Preaching is for instruction. Preaching is for edification. What, if any, relationship does preaching have to *worship* within the congregation?

The most obvious answer to this is related to Peter's description of worshipers as those who "offer up [to God]

spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ," (1 Peter 2:5). In the very least the preacher is engaged in a direct act of worship as he offers up his message to God himself. Some of the best counsel I ever received as a boy preacher was my pastor's insistence upon this principle. "Preach to Jesus, Tommy," he would say. "Remember that the most important person sitting here and listening to you is the Lord Jesus Christ himself." For the preacher, the act of preaching is an offering of his gifts, his powers, indeed, his whole person to God in an act of solemn and joyous worship. But what about those who hear him?

A great part of the answer to this question has to do with our understanding of what preaching and its purpose are. If we understand preaching in its fullest possible meaning, the role of preaching in worship will become clear.

Preaching is the clear and direct communication of God's Word found in Scripture to a contemporary audience. In this light, preaching itself becomes a translation of the original and situational message of the biblical writers to a group of contemporary listeners. The communication of the original and situational intention of the author calls for clarity in interpretation and exposition on the part of the preacher. Paul's intent in writing 1 Corinthians 13 *to the Corinthians* is the message that is to be communicated to the people sitting in front of me in Charleston, West Virginia. This is God's Word. Furthermore, that original, situational message calls for a response to God in his Word, so the preacher must be direct in his application of that Word to his immediate audience. Because worship is always a response to God's initiative in revealing himself, preaching as exposition and application becomes integral to that worship. We speak so that God may be heard. God speaks in our speaking so that his people may know him and respond to him in faith, love, and obedience. This is at the heart of worship. This is at the heart of the role of preaching in worship.

But, there is more to it than this. Preaching is the communication of the Word of God through a whole human personality serving that Word, so that Word addresses the whole

personality of the person hearing it. God delights in human personalities, in their creativity, their individuality, their many-sidedness. This is observable in the diversity evident in the productions of the biblical writers and speakers. In gifting men to preach, this delight is again obvious. By employing human beings in the communication of his Word, God makes the preacher a veritable symphonic orchestra of melody and harmony, high and low notes, dark and bright themes. The purpose behind this is to achieve a connection between the preacher and the listener, between the Word preached and the listening man or woman. Real preaching accomplishes this connection of the Word of God and the word of man.

But there is a greater purpose in the achievement of this connection. Preaching is the communication of God's Word through a human personality to human personalities that has a multi-fold purpose. First, God's Word comes to inform and correct our minds through truth. Second, God's Word comes to inflame our affections through truth. And, third, God's word comes to strengthen and impel our wills through truth. When this happens, the whole man or woman confronted and transformed through truth comes to offer himself/herself to God in a new act of spiritual sacrifice. This is the essence of worship. It is no wonder that Romans 12:1-2, that summarizes true New Testament worship in these very terms, follows the preaching of Paul found in Romans 1:1-11:36.

As such, preaching serves all of the constituent elements of worship. In light of the revelation of God made fresh in preaching, contrition over sin and confession of sin become inevitable. In the preaching of God's full and free grace in Jesus Christ, absolution is proclaimed and enjoyed. In the uncovering of God's riches in the gospel, praise and adoration of God are engendered. In the declaration of his will and design for our lives, dedication and obedience are produced and strengthened. In these things true preaching serves the worship of God in glorious ways. Indeed, it is arguable that nothing in all that God has instituted in our public worship is more calculated to inspire worship than preaching of this kind.

If this is true, then certain implications become immediately evident for preachers.

First, your primary goal in study is to discover the original intention of the biblical writer in a particular book or passage. The original message *was* God's word and *is* God's Word. Exposition and application are the exposing and applying the original and situational message of a portion of Scripture to our contemporary situation and listeners.

Second, your unique personality, gifts, style, voice, strengths, weaknesses, etc. are vital to this process of communication and inspiration. God has made you as a vessel and vehicle of his truth. He is not honored in your attempts to be someone else, even if that someone else is a gifted and popular preacher. As the old saying goes, "When God made you, he threw away the mold." Celebrate this with humility and self-watchfulness. Relax in this without relaxing your determination to grow, improve, and develop as a Christian and a Christian preacher.

Third, your purpose is greater than merely expounding the data of a text or paragraph of Scripture. You must devote yourself to employing all your personality and gifts to stir, excite, inspire, convict, and compel your listeners to confront the Word of God and the great and gracious God who speaks this Word. You are a conduit, bringing the immediacy of God in his holiness and mercy, his otherness and nearness, his judgments and salvation to sinful, needy, longing people. When this happens in the power of the Holy Spirit worshipers are made and worshipers are constrained to turn again to God in "wonder, love, and praise."

With many scholars I reject the popular idea that Judaism, in the period of the Second Temple, had created a "fearful burden which a spurious legalism had laid upon the shoulders of the people" (Emil Schürer). This notion leads to the false conclusion that the Jewish people had little or no concern for purity of heart and related matters of internal spiritual consequence (faith). Their relationship to the Law, it is assumed by this argument, was about keeping external rules and regulations. It was a Catholic ritualism of the sort that Luther contended against in the sixteenth century. But if this reading of Judaism is wrong, and I am prepared to say that it is at best only half right, then what was truly needed was "the obedience of faith." What Paul called for, by such a statement, was a lifestyle that flowed from a deep commitment to faith in Christ alone as seen in evangelical obedience to God.

Israel's mistake, it seems to me, was to listen to God only in the Torah. She failed to recognize that Torah pointed to Messiah and faith in the covenant. Her faith finally failed because she refused to look to Yahweh's servant, Jesus the Savior. The righteousness of God is available in Christ alone (*solus Christus*). Salvation can only come through the grace of God in Christ. All of our believing, and our doing, is by faith and thus is an extension of Christ's doing by the Spirit.

Put another way, hearing and faith are virtually synonymous in both the Old Testament and first-century Judaism and to hear rightly is to obey what one hears. Dozens of Old Testament texts will bear out my conclusion. What amazes me are the lengths to which many go to avoid this necessary and obvious conclusion.

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