

THE PRINCIPLES OF “PREACHING” AND WHY PREACHING IS PROPHETIC

Preaching has many aspects. Many well-known Christian preachers of the Good News have indicated that there are eight main areas of preaching namely:

- Preaching as the word of God.
- Preaching as a sign of the presence of God.
- Preaching as the instrument of Christ’s rule.
- Preaching as the commandments and promises of God.
- Preaching as the gift of freedom and power of the Holy Spirit.
- Preaching as the gift of faith, and the condemnation when rejected.
- Preaching liberates the sinner, and condemns where it is not received in faith.
- Preaching and the twofold effect of the preached Word. “Life and death issues.”

I love to share my faith and preach whenever the opportunity arises especially on Sunday when my calling as a priest dictates. However, I am aware that preaching is a gift from God and not all called to be a priest are gifted preachers. So the challenge I always face in preaching is, “What has the preached word of God done in my life?” As you read this focus, I would like you to try and answer the same question not as a preacher but bearing in mind the eight points. For me, the word of God from Mark 8:38 (If anyone is ashamed of me and of my word in this sinful and adulterous generation, the Son of man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels) has transformed my life, liberated me from sin, and set my feet on the way to eternity. Alleluia!

1. Preaching as the Word of God.

Preaching as the word of God is clearly indicated in the Old and the New Testaments. From the Old Testament concept, we read and find that God, in communicating His “Word” to the children of Israel, did not normally allow His voice to sound as thunder directly from Heaven upon the ears of the assembled people. It is noted that whenever God had a word to speak, He spoke it through the medium of a prophet, who in speaking so closely identified with God’s own “Word” that it may be said that the mouth of the prophet was the mouth of God Himself. For example, in Isaiah 55:11 and Haggai 1:12, we read and find that man’s speech can really become God’s Word in the event of it being communicated to those who are intended to hear.

Commenting on the power of Haggai’s Word to stir up the people of his day to begin work of building the temple, John Stott in his book *I Believe in Preaching* says, “The people who received not what they heard from the mouth of the mortal man, otherwise than if the majesty of God had openly appeared.” For there was no ocular view of God given; but the message of the prophet obtained as much power as though God descended from Heaven.

Today, we can say that from the prophets of the Old Testament, the written Word of God and His promises have been fulfilled in the New Testament in the Life, teaching ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The apostles of Jesus Christ carried out the Ministry of Preaching the Gospel. This has continued and the Word of God is normally heard by men in a similar form through the word of man, a preacher of the Gospel, called and appointed by God to the task.

This task of the preacher of the “Word” is to expound the Scripture in the hearing of the worshipping Church, clearly indicating that it is God’s Word of grace, love, redemption, judgement and salvation. It must be preached with authority, humility and integrity so that the people may hear the voice of God. It is through the ministry of the lay and the ordained ministers that the human race may hear God’s voice. This leads us to our second principle of preaching – Preaching as a sign of the presence of God.

2. Preaching as a Sign of the Presence of God.

Preaching as a sign of the presence of God is a very important principle in preaching God’s Word. Christians have argued that words are nothing else but signs in the sense that through the Preaching of the “Word” by His ministers, God in Christ therefore gives His sacramental presence in the midst of His Church, imparts to men and women the grace that the “Word” promises, and establishes His Kingdom over the hearts of the hearers.

The preaching of the word by a minister, lay or ordained, is the grace from behind which, in coming near to men, God reveals Himself. It has been noted in the Old Testament that when the prophet says “by the breath of His lips” this must not be limited to the person of Christ; for as Stott says, it refers to the “Word” which is preached by His ministers. Christ acts by them in such a way that he wishes their mouth to be reckoned as His mouth, and their lips as His lips. In the light of this therefore, we can certainly say that Christ uses the preached word as means of revelation and self-communication in much the same way as He uses the other signs of His presence and grace in His historical acts of revelation. For these reasons Christians agree and seem to refer to preaching as a token of the presence of God, and as a means whereby He comes near to His people.

The Lord said to ‘come’ when He gives any token of His presence. He approaches by the preaching of the “Word”; and He approaches also by various benefits, which He bestows upon His people. Stott takes note of the fact that Paul in Romans 10:8 equates God’s being near to the preaching of the Gospel. We can certainly say that preaching is the means whereby the gifts of Christ are conveyed to us. The voice, which is in itself mortal, is made an instrument to communicate eternal life. God has ordained His “Word” as the instrument by which Jesus Christ, with all His grace, is dispensed to us. This clearly is indicated in our third principle where Christ is ruling in the hearts of men and women.

3. Preaching as the Instrument of Christ’s Rule.

When Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, He established a new system of rule. He made the Will of God the Father known (Mark 1:15) and his ministry clearly indicates that the sceptre of His Kingdom is the Gospel. He was the Father’s beloved Son who came to accomplish God’s new rule on Earth. Christ does not otherwise, according to Stott, rule among us than by the decline of the Gospel. Scholars have argued that the Church is the sign of that Kingdom in the sense that through its means not only does Christ create new communities but also new peoples. Preaching is such a mighty instrument in the hands of the Lord that through its means not only does Christ create and uphold and rule His Church, but also in a hidden way directs the whole course of history and creates the community of believers. Preaching establishes the Kingdom of God far and wide wherever the disciples of Jesus go and proclaim His “Word” (Matt 28:20)

As we read in Acts 1:8, we find that in replying to the Apostles' question about the manner of the Kingdom and its time, Jesus simply turned their thoughts toward their appointed task of preaching the Gospel. Stott applies many prophecies of the rule of the Messiah among the nations to preacher of the "Word" for he regards Christ as acting in this word mainly through the instrument of the preached Word. This is why Jesus Christ spoke of the Gospel and called it the Kingdom of God. For unless we adhere to it, we are rebels against God, and are banished from all His benefits. For we cannot participate in there until we are reformed. Preaching of the Word renews, restores all things; Heaven and Earth are restored by preaching the doctrine of salvation; because in Christ, as Paul says, are collected all things that are either in Heaven or Earth – when they had established the Church by the Word.

4. Preaching as the Commandments and Promises of God.

The preached Word becomes effective to accomplish its command and promises. Preaching God's Word must be taken seriously. It is mighty in power to effect what God promises or commands, even though that "Word" may be uttered through the frail human words of the preacher. God is true, not only because He is ready to stand faithfully by His word promises, but also because whatever He says in His words, He fulfils the same in deed; for He so speaks that His command immediately becomes His act as indicated in Romans 3:4.

For example, when God speaks through the mouth of the preacher offering forgiveness, those who hear the word in faith are there and then really absolved from their sins, for the "Word" effects what it declares. "Christ put forth his power in the ministry which he has instituted, in such a manner that it made evident that it was not instituted in vain – for He is not separated from the minister, but on the contrary His power is declared officious in the ministry of the minister." (1 Cor.3:7 NIV).

So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

For this reason the Gospel is not only preached that it may only be heard by us, but that it may seed immortal life, altogether reform our hearts, and as often then as God's fatherly love toward us is preached, Stott says, let us know that there is given to us ground for true repentance, that with peaceable conscience we may be certain of salvation. This leads us into our fifth principle as it is indicated in the preached "Word" as effective only in the freedom and power of the Holy Spirit.

5. Preaching as the Gift of Freedom and Power of the Holy Spirit.

The preached Word effective only in the freedom and power of the Holy Spirit is a very important principle in preaching. Christians have argued that the word of the preacher can only become the "Word" through the sovereign and free act of the Holy Spirit, by whose power alone preaching can be effective. It is indicated that saving is not ascribed to the word, as salvation is conveyed by external sound of the voice, or as if the office of saving is taken away from God, and transferred elsewhere (Jas 1:21)

The work of the Holy Spirit then is formed to the Word of God. However, a distinction is made that we may know that the external word is of no avail by

itself, unless blessed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Stott says that all power of action, then resides in the Spirit himself, and for this reason all power ought to be entirely offered to God alone. The whole power of the preacher is included in the word, but in such a way nevertheless that Christ must always remain Lord and Master. We are aware that not all preachers and preaching bear witness to the Word of God. The act may remain on a merely human level throughout, in which case the preacher with all his eloquence, skill and favour will accomplish nothing.

When Paul calls himself a 'minister of the Spirit' Stott says he does not mean by this that the grace of the Holy Spirit and his indulgence were tied to his preaching so that he could whenever he pleased breathe forth the Spirit along with the utterance of the voice. It is one thing for Christ to connect his influence with a man's doctrine, and quite another for the man's doctrine to have such efficacy of itself. For this reason, we are then ministers of the Spirit, not as if we held him enclosed within us, or as if he were upon us all (2 Cor.3:6) The Scripture shows that God sometimes connects Himself with His servants and sometimes separates Himself from them. In Malachi 4:6, we read and find that God never resigns to preachers His own office. Indeed when He separates Himself from His ministers, nothing remains in them. Therefore, preachers can only be effective ministers of the word when they entirely rely on the power of the Holy Spirit.

6. Preaching as the gift of faith, and the condemnation when rejected.

Many Christians agree that in the event of God's connecting Himself with the preacher, to make his act of speaking effective Word of the Lord, a relationship is set up between the human act of the preacher and the Divine action of grace which we may call a sacramental union. Stott has indicated that this relationship is a complex issue in the field of the theology of the sacrament and can only be more fully discussed with the subject of sacraments. For the purpose of this reflection, however, these points may be noted: When God graciously comes to give His presence and Power, along the human word, there is the closest identity between the Divine and human actions. In Haggai 1:12, we find that the work of God is not distinguished from the word of the prophet. He is not separated from the minister, as we also read in 1 Cor.3:7. God Himself who is the author is conjoined with the minister as we also read in 1 Cor.1:9. So close is the identity that the preacher can actually be called a minister of the Spirit and his work spoken of in the most exalted terms. Christians have argued that it is the preacher who effects what is really effected by God. I am of the opinion that even when all this happens there must remain at the same time the sharpest distinction between what is Divine and what is human in this mysterious event. As ministers, preachers, lay and ordained, we need to know and distinguish the Lord on the one side and ministers on the other. There is no doubt that the minister is the servant not a master – an instrument, not the hand; as man, not God.

7. Preaching Liberates the Sinner and Condemns Where it is Not Received in Faith.

The seventh principle in preaching is "The preached word is effective to condemn where it is not received in faith." It has been emphasised that when the Word of God comes through preaching, its effectiveness does not depend on receptiveness of the hearer – though the nature of its effect may be determined. As against these who dissolved the mystery of God's activity in preaching into a

purely internal subjective effect in the hearts of the hearers Stott says, “Delirious even dangerous are those nations that though the internal word is efficacious, get that which proceeds from the mouth of man is lifeless and destitute of all power.” Many Christians seem to agree that the power of preaching does not proceed from the tongue of man, nor exists in the sound, but that the whole power is to be ascribed altogether to the Holy Spirit; there is, however, nothing to hinder the Spirit from putting forth His power in the word preached as indicated in Hebrews 4:12.

The wickedness and depravity of men do not make the word quite apart from the receptive hearing. Though the Word of God does not always exert its power on man, yet it is in a manner included in itself, as we read in Hebrews 4:12. For while there was no preached Gospel, the entire world was without care and rest. There was little to argue or dispute about; the Devil reigned without question. But since our Lord Jesus Christ has appeared with pure doctrine of the Gospel as indicated in Acts 2:1-4, there is no alibi. All will be judged in the light of the Gospel.

8. Preaching and the Twofold Effect of the Preached Word. “Life and death Issues.”

It is certainly conceivable that the Gospel has twofold effect. It can either soften or harden the heart of man. It can either save or condemn the hearer. The Gospel is never preached to entertain men. It is never preached in vain, but has invariably an effect, either for life or death as indicated in 2 Cor.2:15-17. The word is efficacious for the condemning of the wicked as is indicated in Isaiah 55:11. The word of Jesus to Peter in Luke 15:18-19 clearly indicated that the office of preaching in the symbol of the keys is very properly applied to the office of preaching. We know that there is no other way in which the gate of life is opened to us than by the Word of God; and for this reason the key is placed, as it were, in the hands of the ministers of the Word. As there are many who are guilty of wickedly rejecting the deliverance offered them, the power and authority to bind is likewise granted to ministers of the Gospel as indicated in Matthew 6:9.

Those who will hear, obey in faith, and repent, grace and forgiveness will be shown to them. In the same way, those who will hear and disobey will be condemned. This is the truth about the preached Word of God. The twofold effect of it is either eternal life or eternal condemnation. Man’s free will cannot change God’s plan for humanity. In John 3:16, the climax of the twofold effect of the preached Word is clearly expressed. All are invited.

Notes

J.R.W. Stott
R.S. Wallace
J. Packer
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John Young

I Believe In Preaching.
Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament.
Theruelios pp 3 – 12.
Theruelios pp 88 – 92.
The Case Against Christ 2006.