

The Importance of Theological Preaching

By Michael R. Jones

The modern church has sacrificed the apostolic faith on the altar of cultural relevance. The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of the seeming irrelevance of his message when he wrote the First Epistle to the Corinthians and acknowledged that his message was “unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Paul affirms, however, that he will remain faithful to that message no matter how irrelevant it may seem. “And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). For Paul, the message was important, not the messenger or the medium or even the felt needs of the audience. This message was, of course, the great truths of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Yet modern Christianity has abandoned the message of “Christ and him crucified” for something more appealing to the masses. No longer is the message of Christ essential to the furtherance of the kingdom, this place has been usurped by “other gospels.” Marketing ideas, support groups, and self-esteem workshops have crept their way into the mission of the church. It is not uncommon today to attend churches on Sunday morning where the Gospel is not proclaimed and the pastor does not preach, instead he shares. This sharing usually involves the proclamation of a truth perhaps illustrated by the Scriptures, but drawn mostly from the world of business principles or pop psychology. This author was informed by one man whose pastor has not preached a sermon in years, the church now has “talks” in which the pastor addresses current issues that he deems relevant to those in attendance and the gospel is rarely presented because he doesn’t want to “turn people off.” No wonder church members fail to see the comprehensive benefit of the Scriptures for their lives. “One reason why people sometimes doubt the abiding value of God-centered preaching is because they have never heard any.”¹

It appears as if pastors and church members alike have forgotten that the church belongs to God. This means that not only must the mission of the church be determined by God, but the means of accomplishing that mission must also be determined by God. The following indictment is all too true in many churches today:

In many evangelical congregations, one can often tell immediately what literature the pastor has been reading, what his views are on the latest book, what he’s just been influenced by, etc. So many of them seem to be just sort of shooting from the hip. The guy usually claims a high view of Scripture on paper, but it seems that in actual practice, when he mounts the pulpit, he thinks his authority comes from somewhere else – from his ability to read sociological trends or something.²

There are many who would disagree with this assessment, but there is much to commend it. Preachers fail to grasp how significant their task is. They have high standards in theory and on paper and yet another standard when it comes time to fill the role. For example, many conservative evangelicals would not affirm Karl Barth’s Neo-orthodox view of Scripture. They

¹ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 21.

² “An Interview with William Willimon,” *Modern Reformation*, November/December 2000, 44.

would say that the whole Bible is literally true and historically accurate, but then would turn right around and preach the story of David and Goliath as “How to Defeat the Giants in Your Life” or preach from Ruth about how deal with your mother-in-law. Neither of these sermons would require Christ to die in order for them to be true and the same sermons could be preached from a novel promoted by Oprah’s book club or from a primetime soap opera and they would probably achieve the same results.

The Bible, however, is not a self-help book, or a Precious Promise Book, or an instruction manual for life’s problems. Instead, the Bible reveals God to man through his redemptive acts in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. This revelation is systematic, personal, and progressive.³ Even an exciting historical narrative such as the story of David and Goliath has redemptive-historical value and must be preached properly (that is, in light of redemptive history) to do justice to the revelation.

Preaching is a message as well as a method. It is even arguable that preaching is a message rather than a method. The right message poorly proclaimed is preferable to a nonmessage well proclaimed. Paul saw his own function as being to declare the word of the cross. He had to proclaim the facts: Christ died, Christ rose. But he had also to proclaim the meaning of those facts. Uninterpreted, they were useless and meaningless. Interpreted as Christ’s vicarious suffering for sin and the attestation of his divine sonship and lordship, they were the saving power of God.⁴

Notice there is no mention made in Paul’s writings of using the Old Testament narratives to demonstrate “life principles” nor does Paul promote his ability to make the Scriptures “culturally relevant.” Sin is something that crosses cultural boundaries and, thank God, salvation crosses cultural boundaries as well. Paul made it clear that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Preachers today, however, in their attempt to make the Scriptures relevant to society and to demonstrate the practicality and earthly value of being a Christian have attempted to fulfill the Great Commission by taking a message that is contrary to the nature of man and making it palatable to the masses. The problem is that part of the message must be sacrificed for this to happen. That is the only way something unacceptable and irrelevant can become acceptable and relevant to the natural man. They have succeeded only in weakening the gospel message and distorting the truth of God’s salvific work in Jesus Christ.

Many preachers today would judge a sermon to be good if it had a good outline, a catchy title, and really “spoke to people’s lives.” Secondary are the considerations regarding how faithful it is to the text or how Christ was exalted. “If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the members of a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it.”⁵ Many sermons have great outlines, catchy titles, and captivating illustrations, but these do not make Christian preaching. “Preaching, when truly

³ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 5-7.

⁴ Donald Macleod, “Preaching and Systematic Theology,” in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1986), 246-247.

⁵ Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 147.

Christian, is *distinctive*.”⁶ These sermons may be great motivational speeches, but they are not sermons about Christ nor is Christ lifted up and believers edified. As a result, believers go home spiritually malnourished because they have not been fed on the Bread of Life and the lost go home wondering what all the fuss is about. “Our Lord himself warns us, as he did the Pharisees, that any form of preaching or reading the Bible that misses Christ at the center is not genuine preaching or reading of Scripture.”⁷

Once the Scriptural authority is removed by relegating the Bible to the level of a self-help book, the picture of the church becomes blurred and is eventually unrecognizable. No longer is the church the body of Christ, the called-out group of people upon whom God has put his name, the church is just another support group or country club, or worse, it becomes a business just like any other. This changing picture of the church is evident today. Certainly the Bible uses many varied pictures of the church to illustrate its role in the world. We have even adopted modern images such as that of a hospital to illustrate the same truths. But something is subtly changing in the way even church members and pastors view the church. Christianity has become big business and local churches have become the wholesale distributors. Now the gospel has become a commodity to be marketed rather than a truth to be believed and Christianity is an option to be chosen rather than a life to be embraced. The local church has to do what it can to “get the word out about this amazing new opportunity before it’s too late.” The message is “out there,” but it’s not the same message that resulted in stripes on the backs of the apostles or fires around the feet of Reformation preachers.

Perhaps this is true simply because it doesn’t cost anything to be a Christian today. Pastors, in their efforts to overthrow the caricatures of bygone eras, have sought to establish credibility in the business world by adopting business models and managerial paradigms to define their roles. This idea of church as big business drives pastors to abandon theological preaching. Under this model, the pastor is no longer the spiritual leader or spiritual authority in the church; he is the Chief Executive Officer and the deacons or church leaders serve as the Board of Directors. This mentality must inevitably carry over into the pulpit. Since the church is big business it becomes the responsibility of the pastor to motivate the workers (that is, the laity), develop programs that give people more for their contribution dollar (hence all the activities, support groups, and “fellowships”), and ensure that the organization turns a profit (that is, it must at the least, produce measurable growth such as professions of faith, baptisms, new members). The modern church member wants more “bang for his buck” than in years past. To accomplish this, the practical becomes more important than any other concern because evident and measurable results must be produced at all costs.

Suddenly, what I do for the church becomes infinitely more important than who I am in Christ and therefore, doctrine is not important. It is not important what I learn as long as I have the skills necessary to contribute to the body. The Bible ceases to be the “only rule for faith and practice” as it once was and becomes a rule only for practice. To this guidebook (because it is no longer a holy book, it is simply the guidebook above all others) is added leadership books, church growth and marketing books, and various other self-help books. Many of these “Christian” self-help books are really business-oriented but because they have a Christian slant, they are marketed so that their claim to help one maximize his potential as a servant of Christ

⁶ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

⁷ Michael Horton, *In the Face of God*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 205

cannot be overlooked. In reality, they only preach the same self-centered self-esteem liberalism promoted by Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller.

The preacher who fails to understand the significance of the theology of Scripture (especially as it regards the nature, function, and purpose of the church) will easily fall prey to this same mentality. This preacher then ceases to go to the Lord for his messages, but to the felt needs of his congregation or the ministry standards set by his local church leadership or denomination or the ministry objectives set by the latest church growth guru who in turn has borrowed his objectives from the most profitable Fortune 500 companies. “In such churches the Bible is subjected to strained interpretations in order to fit into the latest marketing schemes foisted upon the church. Biblical soundness yields to pragmatic results. Once a new method produces results, church growth strategists declare it to be a *church growth principle*.”⁸

These factors contribute to the current glut of bad preaching so prevalent in our churches today. By “bad preaching” this writer does not mean that the preaching is boring. In fact, much of it is enjoyable, even entertaining, but it is not good preaching in that it does not fulfill the Scriptural mandate concerning preaching. There are numerous examples of this bad preaching and their prevalence depends on various circumstances such as the denominational distinctives of the preacher or church, the education level of the preacher (although this can sometimes be very misleading, in either direction), the mission and vision of the church or preacher, and the preacher’s own view of his theological role.

In most mainline conservative denominations, one does not attend church for long without being exposed to different preaching styles. While styles of preaching may vary because the personalities of preachers vary, the content of sermons should remain close to the text of Scripture and should relate in some way to the person and work of Christ. This does not mean that the preacher only preaches Christological texts or preaches the lecture notes from his seminary theology classes. Many texts do not explicitly deal with Christ, especially in the Old Testament, and the preacher must consider this in his preparation. This is often the problem, the right kind of preaching takes time and is hard work. This is often too much for those who have bought into the business mentality of the Church Growth Movement. They view themselves as executives rather than “heralds of the Word of Life.”

Calvin was the first major modern expositor to firmly adhere to the natural, historical sense of Scripture. Calvin was so firm in his belief that the expositor must first determine the original meaning of the text that Philip Schaff would later refer to him as the “founder of historical-grammatical exegesis.”⁹ To Calvin, the original, historical meaning of a passage was the meaning of the passage. He had little patience with those who read meanings, even Christological ones, into texts where they didn’t belong.

This means that the expositor must not twist Scripture to find “the Jesus part” in every passage. That is not preaching Christ either. “A passage retains its Christocentric focus, and a sermon becomes Christ-centered, not because the preacher finds a slick way of wedging a reference to Jesus’ person or work into the message but because the sermon identifies a function this particular text legitimately serves in the great drama of the Son’s crusade against the

⁸ Phil A. Newton, “The Pastor and Church Growth,” in *Reforming Pastoral Ministry*, ed. John H. Armstrong, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 265. Emphasis in original.

⁹ Cited in Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 130, n. 80.

serpent.”¹⁰

So to preach Christ one must remain faithful to the text of Scripture and not read anything into the text that is not there, but the expositor must understand that each text in the Bible reveals God to us and since God’s most perfect and complete revelation of himself is in the person and work of Jesus Christ, then in some way each text must be related to some aspect of the person and work of Christ.

Indeed, that is how many homileticians define “preaching Christ and him crucified.” For example, Sidney Greidanus defines “preaching Christ” as “preaching sermons which authentically integrate the meaning of the text with the climax of God’s revelation in the person, work, and/or teaching of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament.”¹¹

This definition allows much flexibility in the choice of texts (as it should) and in explaining the texts but is rigid enough to force the preacher to carefully consider whatever text he is preaching in light of Christ. This means that the preacher must work with the text to avoid resorting to shallow typology or allegory, neither of which allows the preacher to integrate the text with Christ’s work adequately. It also means that the preacher must actually understand the text prior to preaching it rather than simply using it as a springboard to get to whatever points the preacher is trying to make. “In many sermons the biblical passage read to the congregation resembles the national anthem played at a football game – it gets things started but is not heard again during the afternoon.”¹² Such preaching demonstrates that the Word really isn’t that significant to the Christian life. “An old Dutch preacher has sagely observed that the pulpit must not drive us to the text, but rather the text must drive us to the pulpit.”¹³

Sadly, there are fewer and fewer sermons sounding from pulpits that complete this maxim. This is perhaps why many church members are very well-versed on distinctives peculiar to their denomination, but are more than a little hazy on the fundamental truths of Christianity. These believers often lapse into legalism because they do not understand the similarities between their own and other denominations. Likewise, many Christians are very familiar with the latest trends in end-time prophecy as popularized in several Christian novels, but lack even a basic understanding of historic doctrines such as the Trinity, or the inspiration of Scripture.

At the 1996 Christian Bookseller’s Association Convention, *Modern Reformation* magazine conducted a survey of evangelical Christians over the three-day period of the convention. When asked if they could name the Ten Commandments, only 5% of those questioned could name all ten. Most respondents could not even name half. Only 7% were at least close when asked to define justification.¹⁴

Other pastors fill time by addressing issues pertinent to that particular body. While the Word does speak to many contemporary issues, it is the preaching of the Word that must motivate and change people, not the preacher who uses the Word. These pastors attempt to solve problems by delivering sermons intended to make the church feel guilty for what he perceives as their lack of performance in certain areas. These preachers are often heavy on the application. While some congregations require and “desire solid explanations whose relevance is more fully

¹⁰ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 293.

¹¹ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10.

¹² Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker book House, 1980), 20.

¹³ Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), 19.

¹⁴ The complete survey is available at <http://www.alliancenet.org/radio/whi/whi.poll1996.html>.

spelled out in down-to-earth application,”¹⁵ and while “the healthiest preaching does not assume listeners will automatically see how to apply God’s truths to their lives; it supplies the application people need,”¹⁶ the application must be founded on clear exegesis and interpretation. Many Christians have difficulty adequately and soundly interpreting the Scriptures because they are forced to follow the example of their pastor who interprets it any way he pleases in order to get the maximum performance out of his people or push his own agenda.

Some are guilty of this same tendency but for more noble reasons. Hoping to encourage their parishioners to advance in the Christian life, they make their messages soundly practical. These messages are strong on method but short on fundamental issues of theology and Bible truth. The believer who sits under this preaching knows four different ways to have a quiet time, the eight steps to reaching your goals, nine reasons for growing the Sunday School and five different ways to do it, but they have no idea what any of this has to do with their being “in Christ.” This practical instruction, while necessary, has been divorced from the purpose for such practical instruction in the first place. Either the believer will fail to understand the necessity for walking with God daily and will fall by the wayside or their preferred method or their pastor’s preferred method will become “the method” and they will lapse into legalism.

Even moral preaching can quickly turn from moral instruction into moralism. As Jay Adams notes, “It is easy to become moralistic while preaching. While there is nothing wrong with preaching morality, in contrast, moralism is legalistic, ignores the grace of God, and replaces the work of Christ with self-help.”¹⁷ Adams is right, moralism involves blind adherence to a rigid code of laws that may or may not be Scriptural. These laws or “standards” or “convictions” eventually become the end purpose of the Christian life and may usurp the place of the Scriptures in the life of the believer. These standards then inevitably become the test of fellowship or the gauge by which other Christians or churches are judged. True Christian morality, however, has its foundation in theology. What I believe about God determines the way I live my life before God. “The important fact is that in the Bible a duty always grows out of a doctrine. Even in Proverbs and in James the sacred writers base morality on theology.”¹⁸ Notice the Ten Commandments, the ultimate moral instruction. The law begins with “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2). The gospel comes before the law and the duty of the believer grows out of this objective knowledge of the redemptive work of God.

Moralism, however, demands that people do things rather than be something. Paul was not shy about dealing with moral issues that trouble the church even today, but Paul constantly reminds his readers of their position in Jesus Christ. Paul is encouraging his readers not to do what they can do, but to be what they are supposed to be in Jesus Christ. The doing will follow the being. Adams reminds the preacher, “You must not exhort your congregation to do whatever the Bible requires of them as though they could fulfill those requirements on their own, but only as a consequences of the saving power of the cross and the and the indwelling, sanctifying power and presence of Christ in the person of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹

Perhaps the reason why these non-biblical styles of preaching are so rampant is because

¹⁵ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 86. The reference here is to blue-collar verses white collar congregations.

¹⁶ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 44.

¹⁷ Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 146.

¹⁸ Andrew Blackwood, *Doctrinal Preaching for Today*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 79

¹⁹ Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 147.

they simply require less work than the historic method of expositing the text of Scripture. They not only require less work each week for the upcoming Lord's Day, but they also require less preparation of the preacher as an individual. The preacher does not have to have even a fundamental understanding of the Biblical languages, he does not need to understand the depth of the early church councils as they dealt with the Christological heresies, nor does he have to be skillful with the use of lexicons, commentaries, and theologies in order to preach basic business strategies and self-help psychology gleaned from popular-level books. The following lengthy quote explains what preparation in the pastor's study entails, or should entail:

Preaching is work, hard work. It takes real work with the text, real work with the context and real work with the redemptive-historical context. Preaching is not the calling for the man who spends the bulk of his weekday afternoons at Kiwanis, Rotary or Chamber of Commerce luncheons. Nor is preaching the calling for public relations types who are advancing their images with promotional campaigns which look like Madison Avenue or worse. What a pity that the Lord Jesus did not have a New York executive managing his "style." And oh, the poor apostle Paul—he was born too early for the Church Growth Movement. [...] But biblical preaching requires work with the sources; hard work with the text, commentaries, journal articles, lexicons and a host of other resources. I had a friend who has been in the ministry for twenty-five years and liked to brag that he hadn't read a theological book since he graduated from seminary. What a tragedy! If you are not now purchasing and learning to use the basic tools for working with a biblical text, then you are not learning what to preach. If you have no commitment to working at your preaching and working 20 hours per week in your study, then you are not working hard at mastering the content of the text of Scripture. If you believe that you are proclaiming the word of life and it is the difference between heaven and hell and that it is the building of the congregation in the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ, then you will have 20 hours because that's what it is going to take. You are going to have to work with books. You are going to have to work with the gold of God's word. Like the Marines, the church needs a few good men—and your study is boot camp. You are on a battle field. So get yourself in shape now and start to begin to pay the price to be a herald of the word of life. It simply can't be done with 2-5 hours of preparation a week.²⁰

It appears, however, as if many preachers do little more than jot down a few thoughts on a legal pad and then fill in the gaps (and thus fill time) with whatever books they have been reading that week. In other words, they "shoot from the hip" as indicated above rather than delivering a carefully prepared sermon whose purpose is to exalt Christ and nourish the body of Christ.

At this point one may rightfully ask, "What is sound theological or doctrinal preaching and what method could I use to pursue it?" The most obvious method is the method employed in many churches which do not follow a strict liturgical calendar in which they offer a free-text

²⁰ James T. Dennison, Jr., "Building the biblical Theological Sermon, Part I: Perspective," *Kerux: The Online Journal of Biblical Theology*, <http://www.kerux.com/documents/KeruxV4N3A3.asp>.

sermon in the morning (that is, one whose text is chosen by the preacher) and a confessional or catechism sermon in the evening. This is certainly a way to enhance the theological acumen of one's congregation. Indeed the Westminster Larger Catechism was written as an aid to preachers and this is why others, such as the Heidelberg Catechism, were divided into "Lord's Days." The idea was that a preacher would go through the whole thing in one year and then start over. But this has its drawbacks, not the least of which is that unless one is a very creative and dynamic preacher, even the most hardy churchgoer can become bored after hearing the same sermons over and over again year after year.

Confessions have as their purpose to explain clearly the doctrinal standards of a certain group or theological community. They are not to serve as a replacement for the thorough understanding of the Scriptures. In fact, this is the most decisive argument against preaching directly from catechisms and confessions.

Our mandate is to preach the Word. To resort instead to expounding a human document is to confuse our people by blurring the distinction between what is normative revelation and what is to be judged by that revelation. Even when creeds are inerrant (a claim that can be made for the Apostle's Creed, for example), their proportion, balance, and selection of topics will not be that of Scripture. Furthermore, confessions and catechisms present doctrine abstracted from its existential context – the life-situation of Scripture – and thus obscure its practical relevance or tempt us not to apply it at all.²¹

This does not mean that confessions and catechisms are not useful for preaching theologically. Indeed, they can provide invaluable assistance as expository aids. One often finds, in the better confessions, cogent explanations both of basic Christian doctrines such as justification and adoption, and of more advanced topics such as the covenants and Christian liberty. In addition, since the confessions represent the accumulated wisdom of Christianity from previous ages, the preacher who uses them as guides may be assured that he is not inventing new doctrines or preaching his own private interpretation.

Also, the use of creeds and confessions provide a good indication of the relative importance of doctrines. As the old saying goes, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Every Christian can think of some preacher who is always preaching on election, or Christian liberty, or the tribulation to the exclusion of other important doctrines. The preacher who is diligent about using confessions as a guide will avoid the pitfalls of constantly preaching his pet doctrines, constantly preaching his favorite texts, and failing to do justice to the core doctrines of the Christian faith.²²

How then does a preacher fit theology into his preaching? Of course, biblical theology is done every time a passage of Scripture is interpreted. (This paper assumes that the preacher is practicing expository preaching rather than textual or topical preaching.) But the theology doesn't have to end there. Just as each text is interpreted in light of the teaching of the whole Bible, each doctrine or point of theology encountered is handled in light of the entire system of theology.

²¹ Donald Macleod, "Preaching and Systematic Theology," 269.

²² See Macleod, "Preaching and Systematic Theology," 266-270 for a fuller discussion of the use of creeds and confessions in preaching.

Many preachers will not admit that they have a “system of theology.” They like to think that they believe the Bible and only the Bible. The fact is, however, that everyone has a system of theology whether they admit it or even realize it. There is nothing wrong with having a system. In fact, acknowledgment of a system demonstrates that one has a comprehensive grasp of Bible knowledge and Scriptural truth that provides a framework within which one interprets life.

More importantly, the theological system provides the framework within which each portion of Scripture is to be interpreted and thus preached. When one preaches on Acts 16:31, for example, the preacher may draw on the entire doctrine of faith to help elucidate this text. When preaching on John 3:3 he may draw on the entire body of teaching regarding regeneration. When preaching on 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, a verse often used to “prove” many things that it does not really say, the preacher will draw on the entire teaching regarding the second coming to ensure proper interpretation and application of this text.

This last example leads us to another important function systematic theology: the system of theology provides a control over the interpretation of the text. That is, systematic theology establishes boundaries that the preacher must stay within in order to do justice to the whole of Scripture. This is a most crucial function. An obvious example is James 2:17. When preaching this text, the preacher must be diligent to draw from the entire systematic teaching regarding justification to ensure that justification by faith alone is taught.

These functions are most evident with regard to Christological texts. The historic teaching of the church regarding the deity of Christ and the truth of the Trinity had as its purpose to refine and further explain the Scriptural teaching with respect to the person of Christ. Since the teaching about the work of Christ stands or falls in relation to the person of Christ, this doctrine cannot be underestimated. However, many preachers fail to do justice to the Scriptures relating to the person of Christ, often because they themselves have a diminished understanding of Christology. Others fail in this respect because they fail to see the importance of this doctrine beyond its usefulness in evangelistic preaching.

The fact is, however, that the usefulness or practicality of a doctrine does not determine how often it should be preached, if ever. Instead, the clear teaching of Scripture and the prominence afforded to a doctrine by Scripture determines its necessity. Sadly, though, many preachers and teachers of the Bible fail to see the importance of a precise statement of the Trinity and the deity of Christ when preaching redemption. They stumble over the correct definitions and do an injustice to the Savior by either erring too far on one side or the other. If one does not understand who Christ is and what He did, then he cannot preach the truth about Him unless it happens by accident. If the preacher doesn’t preach the truth about Christ, then those he leads in worship cannot worship Him in truth because they do not know the truth about Him.

In light of the great help that one’s theological system may provide in the pulpit, one must be careful, however, not to let the theology overtake the text. If one is preaching from Philippians 2:5-10 about the humiliation of Christ by his taking on humanity, it is wrong to use systematic theology to minimize the humanity of Christ in order to emphasize his deity. That not only does an injustice to the text, it does an injustice to the body of Christ by giving them a skewed picture of the person of Christ.

The same may be true of many doctrines. For example, many who preach in Calvinistic churches, such as this author does, may fear calling for a decision since such a method has been abused by many who do not share our theology. But the fact is, Paul called for his listeners to

choose Christ by repenting and believing and yet his teaching on election and predestination is very clear. If preaching a text such as 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10, where Paul uses an aorist participle to draw attention to a believer's past act of faith at conversion, it is wrong for the preacher to focus on the believer's life as a continuing act of faith. It is true that the believer's life is a continuing act of faith and the preacher may choose to demonstrate the contrast, but the text emphasizes the active decision of one who comes to Christ and that is where the focus of the sermon should lie. The text must speak its own truth, not the truth the preacher thinks it should speak, even when the preacher has the most noble of intentions for doing so. "Because the bible is God's holy and sacred Word, it must be treated with respect, its purity protected, and its intended message never violated or misrepresented."²³

Likewise, the preacher should allow the text to choose his theology rather than his theology, his text. It is the Scriptures that give life and in order for them to do so they must be proclaimed faithfully. In selecting which books or passages to preach through, the preacher may select portions of Scripture that allow him a well-rounded cycle of theological preaching. If one is following a pattern of preaching through Bible books, as the true expository preacher will do, he must be careful not to select books that cater to his theological whims, but must prayerfully seek the guidance of the Spirit to ensure that the "whole counsel of God" is proclaimed.

What does all of this mean for the preacher? After all, "the preacher's first, and the most important task is to prepare himself, not his sermon."²⁴ First of all, the preacher must be a true "man of the Word." He must be educated enough to understand the theology that flows from the Scripture he is to preach. He must be familiar enough with Scripture that he does not have to struggle with the basic teachings of the Word.

But more than that, he must have a burning desire and a jealousy for the Word of God. He must desire the Word of God like he desires air to breathe. He must be so sure of the truth and power of this Word that he will stop at nothing to defend it and will be stopped by nothing in his preaching of it. He must possess a humility that will drive him to his knees to commune with God. This humility will give him the fire to preach as he should because he knows that the Word he preaches has power because it is not his word, but God's. This understanding will police his heart as he studies and preaches because his jealousy for the Word of God can serve to prevent him from twisting the text to fit his own carnal desires to promote himself or his agenda.

This communion with God is essential. "You need to be alone with God before you can effectively usher others into His presence."²⁵ This is what makes the theology of the Scriptures come alive. "All too often the preacher of the Word strains out the delicious wonders and serves it up with boring dullness, drained of all life!"²⁶ The preacher must himself be impacted by the Word so that the Word will, through him, impact others.

Finally, the theological truths of God's Word, when preached in the power of the Spirit, will transform people's lives. Indeed, the greatest external evidence of the power of God's Word is the people in the pew. This author has only been in ministry a short time and was involved in lay ministry for several years prior to his ordination. In that brief period of time, he has seen people delivered from drunkenness, delivered from immorality, freed from drug addiction and

²³ John MacArthur, Jr., "A Study Method for Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, (Dallas: Word, 1992), 209.

²⁴ D. Martin Lloyd Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 166.

²⁵ Bruce Mawhinney, *Preaching with Freshness*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), 137.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 108.

sexual addiction. This author has seen people freed from the bondage of childhood sexual abuse and physical abuse, he has seen men quit beating their wives and become loving and devoted husbands and fathers, he has seen strippers and prostitutes changed into godly women and has even seen ultra-rational skeptics become sound defenders of a book that they once ridiculed.

These changes do not occur because of the personality of some preacher, or borrowed business strategies implemented in a church-growth setting, or as a result of brow-beating by an aggressive evangelist. These things happen because the Holy Spirit took the truth of the preached Word and pierced the hearts of sinners until they became like that Word and its truth, alive and of God.

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