



RESURGENCE

Preaching and Hearing Good Sermons

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When the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, he commissioned him with a clear divine revelation.

Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to the light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 16:16-18).

This was the *fundamental apostolic ministry*. These early Christian leaders did many things, including performing authentic signs and wonders, dealing with intensely complicated people, problems in local churches, and administering the sacraments. But their *fundamental ministry* was to be "servants" of Christ who would "open [people's] eyes and turn them from darkness to the light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins. . . ." They were to be heralds, or preachers of the good news.

Given this basic truth, one is compelled to ask: "Why has the ministry of Word and Sacrament (which is what my tradition rightly calls it) degenerated into a performance by which most ministers deliver sermons that *almost never* open people's eyes or turn them from darkness to light?" This question calls for further reflection upon what constitutes a good sermon and how listeners should listen to good preaching.

What Constitutes a Good Sermon?

I have already shown (*ACT 3 Weekly*, February 26, 2007) that *good* preaching must carefully labor to keep the Spirit and the Word together. And good preaching must be oracular in form and consciously driven by the biblical text. It will also stress improvisation and freedom in the preaching act itself. Good preaching can't be marketed. And good teachers of preaching can help gifted preachers but they can never create them.

You are either called or you are not called. There must be a sense of Paul's autobiographical note in every God-called minister of the Word.

For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. *Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!* If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward: if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me (1 Corinthians 6: 16-17).

The Demise of Good Preaching: What Happened to the Pulpit?

Back in 1995 Donald G. Bloesch bemoaned the demise of biblical preaching in an article that appeared in the fall issue of *Touchstone* magazine. He expressed nervousness about

worship that was fast becoming entertainment with the goal no longer being the glory of God and the service of his kingdom. He wrote:

Besides preaching, other casualties in the mega-shift include the prayer of intercession and corporate confession of sin followed by assurance of pardon. Extended Scripture reading as a preparation for the sermon is also becoming less frequent. Solos or musical renditions by some special ensemble are increasingly taking the place of congregational singing (13).

Preaching, argued Martin Luther, should include *both* law and gospel. (I think some conservative Lutherans have overplayed this as a hermeneutical device, but the basic point is sound!) By this means a good sermon will must necessarily afflict the comfortable *and* comfort the afflicted. The goal of preaching, in Paul's missional vision, was "the obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26). And divine revelation, as Bloesch effectively argues, is "something both objective and subjective." This means that a good sermon always focuses upon what God has done in human history, *especially in the central acts of Jesus' living, dying and rising again*. But it also means a good sermon is subjective. This means preaching should always be concerned with an evangelical awakening of the heart by the Holy Spirit's power.

The Reformation recovered this full view of preaching and revitalized it within one generation throughout much of Europe. It especially changed Germany, Switzerland, Holland and Britain. But since the Reformation preaching has gone through both good and bad times, I believe we are living through an era that is best described as a bad time for good preaching.

Donald Bloesch provided seven salient points about sermons that will help us reform preaching and recover good sermons if we pay attention and understand his concerns properly.

1. Modern preaching has degenerated into *moralism*. By this point I mean that preaching has become a means for stressing human effort, personal faithfulness and our personal and individual place in God's plan. We talk a lot about personal satisfaction, personal fulfillment and our own joy. Even some very popular evangelical preaching has fallen into this categorical error, becoming reductionistic. (By this I mean preachers can deduce a thesis from the Bible and then reduce everything they preach and teach to this popular or memorable thesis.) Such preaching often centers upon *my satisfaction*, even though this satisfaction is interpreted through the lens of God's purposes for my life. The problem with this is that it can become a type of moralism. All forms of moralism, subtle or otherwise, turn the gospel into some form of law.
2. Modern preaching has also fallen into dangerous gnostic tendencies. Gnosticism was one of the earliest heresies the church had to face. And it has never disappeared, especially in Protestant and evangelical churches. In a gnostic context preaching will stress the awakening of latent human powers found within all of us. Writes Donald Bloesch:

The task of the preacher is to enable us to discover our own divinity or to realize untapped human possibilities. It also involves the claim to secret knowledge of the future based on the right interpretation of biblical prophecy (13-14).

The mystery of the gospel is no longer an "open secret" as Lesslie Newbigin called it. In gnostic evangelicalism the message becomes a special knowledge for the enlightened faithful. You must submit yourself to a system of thought, generally understood in an apocalyptic framework, and then you will have the true insight into God's plan for your life and the world.

3. Contemporary preaching has helped to promote what Bonhoeffer termed "cheap grace," or what some have rightly called, especially in the Wesleyan context, "easy believism." This problem produces a kind of preaching that is built on "truncated orthodoxy," or the message of grace *without* the obedience of true faith. Bloesch also puts this well: "Our mandate is to proclaim not only the message of the cross but also the command to take up our own crosses and follow Christ" (14).
4. Modern preaching, especially in conservative circles, has also promoted what Bloesch has interestingly labeled *orthodoxism*. Teaching takes precedence in a public church worship, as in certain uses of the expository method, while preaching is reduced to heavily informational content. You can preach from the Bible and *not* preach Christ or the cross. Many conservative seminaries have failed us at this very point and it shows in our preaching.
5. Contemporary preaching often degenerates into a form of *exhibitionism*. The sermon is meant to make an impression, to provide a performance. This is also a real danger in many modern forms of preaching, especially among the so-called seeker churches and emergent churches. But even old school fundamentalism and liberalism often failed with regard to this temptation. (This is one of the positive reasons why Billy Graham was such an effective preacher for six decades. He never became an exhibitionist in any sense of the word.)
6. *Enthusiasm*, of the sort that continually puts the emphasis in preaching upon *new experiences*, also creates real problems in the preaching event. Martin Luther was right when he said, "Our theology is certain because it takes us out of ourselves, out of our feelings and experiences, into the promises of God that never deceive."
7. Perhaps the gravest *new* danger for modern preaching is what Bloesch calls the *politicizing of the gospel*. This is now done in pulpits on the Right just as it was done on the Left for decades. The church must *not* be reduced to a culture-shaping society or a partisan political lobby group. The church has a mandate to speak for a culture of life, but even this is not primarily about politics. We cannot avoid helping Christian people understand the ramifications of Christianity for important ethical choices and godly living. And we should preach against social evils since this is part of the law and we must preach the law. But the kingdom of God should *not* be confounded with the Republican Party or the Democratic Party, something done regularly in many pulpits across America.

John Calvin's Vision

As many have noted, John Calvin was pre-eminently the theologian of the Holy Spirit. He understood the role of preaching in a uniquely clear manner. He taught that the ministry of the Word involves two ministers. He called these two the *minister externus* and the *minister internus*. The external preacher is the minister who delivers the message to the church. But the work of the human minister is *not* all there is. The second minister, the internal minister who is the Holy Spirit, must also deliver a message, which in Calvin's words he does to "truly communicate that which is proclaimed through the Word."

Calvin, in his commentary on Micah, actually writes that this work of the Holy Spirit "is the same now as when he formerly endued his servant Micah with a power so rare and so extraordinary." The minister needs to demonstrate, Calvin argues, that he is endued with power from on high; i.e., "a teacher in his Church, must have this seal . . . he must be endued with the Spirit of God."

And this work of the Spirit is also needed by the hearer of good preaching as well. In his commentary on Jeremiah, Calvin prays for God to "not only show us by the Word what is right, but to speak also to us inwardly by thy Spirit." Lord's Day 45, in the *Heidelberg Catechism* urges preachers and listeners to "pray continually and groan inwardly" for that certain unction of the Holy Spirit.

Listening to a Good Sermon

The old saying is true: "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." So good preaching can be done but good listening can still fail. The preacher must prepare and experience the force and power of truth. But the hearer must also learn to listen for the Spirit's prompting and leading. I suggest these actions will help those who listen to preaching:

1. Ask "why" questions, not just "what" questions. As you listen to the text being read listen-do not simply follow words. In fact, I suggest you listen without following in a Bible so that you develop this skill. As the sermon unfolds, ask "why" did Jesus say this, or "why" did Paul urge this action or response? You need to know the meaning of a text in order to see its significance.
2. Plan to respond to whatever it is that God reveals to you in a sermon. Pray often, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." Take an action step and follow it up when you come to the end of a biblical sermon.
3. Make listening to the sermon an act of worship, not simply a classroom experience. Receive the Word with a spirit of gratitude, for it is God who is speaking to you. Be reminded of God's grace and his mercy toward you in Jesus Christ. Remove whatever distractions keep you from listening carefully.
4. Prepare before the sermon to listen to what God may say to you. Start your day with prayer to this end and ask God for the Spirit of revelation when you enter into a service of divine worship. Humble yourself and seek God's glory in your hearing.

Conclusion

Donald Bloesch, whose article on "The Demise of Biblical Preaching" provided the seven challenges to good preaching that I listed above, concludes that article with these strong and empowering words:

What the Church needs today is not a return to scholastic orthodoxy or even to neo-orthodoxy. Nor should we try to restore the pristine theology of the Reformation. Instead, we should return to the Bible as hearers and learners, waiting for God to speak in a fresh way through his Spirit. We should see ourselves not as masters of a secret wisdom but as servants of the Word. We are not co-redeemers nor are we co-creators in forging the kingdom of God; instead, we are ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ having a message to proclaim and a commission to fulfill. If we take this task seriously then Jesus'

words will come to fruition: "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16). We will then, and only then, be a means of grace to a lost and ailing world (16).