

The Word Domesticated

By: David E. Prince, PhD

I fear that evangelicals have won the battle for the Bible in the academy, but we have lost our awe of the Bible preached in our pulpits. Our greatest preaching weakness is not lack of sound exegetical methodology or broad theological understanding, but it is our failure to understand what is happening in the preaching moment. Many stroll to the pulpit to talk to their congregation about God. They don't really believe that in Christian preaching they are speaking for God.

When I teach Christian preaching and simply assert the testimony of the biblical narrative regarding what occurs when the Scripture is faithfully proclaimed, I am often met with looks of incredulity. Most of my students possess an unswerving commitment to the inerrancy and sufficiency of the Bible, but they often shrink from the audacious claim of Scripture that the faithful preacher is the voice of Christ to a congregation. They are far more comfortable thinking about preaching as providing hearers with abstract information about God. I would agree that such a thought appears safer, but I would disagree that it constitutes what the Bible calls preaching.

In an "Introduction to Christian Preaching" class I taught, I referred to the famous quote D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones made in *Preaching and Preachers* on the primacy of preaching, when he asserted, "I would say without any hesitation that the most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and the most urgent need in the Church, it is obviously the greatest need of the world also." I naïvely thought the comment would be met with rousing affirmation in a confessionally conservative evangelical seminary. However, one student with a questioning look on his face slowly raised his hand and asked, "You don't really believe that, do you?" I replied, "Yes, I really do." I still do believe it today. In fact, I believe preaching is an act of spiritual war at the apex of the cosmic battle.

In Romans 10, the apostle Paul asserts the necessity of worldwide proclamation of the gospel. He argues that God is at work in the world saving sinners, Jew and Gentile, by grace and not legalism. In Romans 10:13, Paul provides the promise: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." He follows this promise with a series of rhetorical questions. First, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?" (Rom. 10:14a, NASB). Second, "How will they believe in him whom they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:14b). Third, "And how will they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14c). Fourth, "How will they preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. 10:15a). The logic is clear: Preachers are sent, they preach, people hear Christ as they hear the preacher's sermon, they believe, and they call on him in faith. Romans 10:17 offers a summarizing conclusion of this stunning claim about what happens in preaching, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ."

In *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: Romans*, Leon Morris explains that in Romans 10:14, "The point is that Christ is present in the preachers; to hear them is to hear him (Luke 10:16), and the people ought to believe when they hear him." In faithful preaching of the word of God, the listener is not simply hearing about Christ, they are hearing the word of Christ. Christ himself speaks through his feeble but faithful preachers. Salvation comes when his voice is

heard, and the listener responds, not to the preacher, but to Christ in faith. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul commends the church in Thessalonica saying, "...because when you received the message about God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the message of God, which also works effectively in you believers." To the Corinthian church enamored with trained rhetorical eloquence, Paul states, though he came to them, "in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling," his proclamation among them was "a powerful demonstration by the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:3-4).

Jesus was the preacher par excellence, and his message, the message of his kingdom, was urgent. Luke records the Galilean crowds pleading with Jesus to stay and continue his ministry of healing and exorcism, to which he responds, "I must proclaim the good news about the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because I was sent for this purpose," (Luke 4:43). Jesus elucidates that preaching is the preeminent necessity because it was the ministry to which he was ordained; and, further, his message was the presence of the kingdom in his own person. The word of the kingdom (i.e. the preaching of the gospel) was even more important than the miraculous signs of the kingdom. Jesus performed miracles but they were subordinate to his preaching ministry. I fear some present day evangelical preachers do not believe Jesus in this essential matter and would trade their pulpit for the ability to heal the sick without a moment of hesitation?

After his resurrection Jesus continues his work in the world by calling and gifting men to preach the word. Jesus' apostles possess the apostolic sign gifts but they minister in the same way Jesus did, recognizing the primacy of preaching. After healing a man lame from birth Peter asked, "Why are you amazed at this? Or why do you stare at us, as though we had made him walk by our own power or godliness?" (Acts 3:12). Peter immediately transitions to preaching, explaining that God had already spoken to them "by the mouth of his holy prophets," (Acts 3:21) and is now speaking to them about Christ and his kingdom. The religious leaders are filled with rage, not about the healing, but about the bold preaching and "ordered them not to preach or teach at all in the name of Jesus," (Acts 4:18). The disciples respond by praying for more boldness in preaching, and by continuing to preach in the name of Christ with boldness (4:29, 31). The incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the final word, ushered in a new dawn of global gospel preaching (Matt. 28:16-20, Mark 13:10, Rom. 10:18, Heb. 1:1-3).

Evangelicals spend a great deal of time talking about the mechanics and delivery of sermons but such talks are of little value among preachers who have lost a sense of the glory of what happens in the preaching moment. In fact, I believe many, if not most, of the problems in contemporary evangelical preaching would be rectified by rightly understanding what is at stake in Christian preaching. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, "True preaching, after all, is God acting. It is not just a man uttering words; it is God using him." Do you believe that? I find many evangelicals are committed to biblical inerrancy and have sound theology, but possess a casual attitude toward preaching. The difference between understanding the preaching task as identifying with the people and talking about God and as standing under the authority of God and preaching his word as his voice to the congregation is profound.

One way in which a minimized view of preaching is evident is in contemporary willingness to accept or even prefer video preaching or dramatic reenactments to flesh-and-blood sermonic proclamation. A few years ago, when Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* movie was released, I was stunned to hear an evangelical leader I deeply respect pronounce, "This is the greatest evangelistic tool in the history of the church." The attitude seems to be that big budget films are

a more powerful medium than preaching for conveying the gospel message. But, as Edmund Clowney argued in *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, "It is deeply flawed in its conclusion at this very point: the presence of Jesus. An actor pleads with the viewer to come to him and to trust in him. The effort to give reality beyond the preached word fails as fiction. The actor is not Jesus."

It is also increasingly common in some churches to provide the sermon in corporate worship via video rather than a live preacher. The thought is that some men are exceptionally gifted preachers and the people will benefit more from hearing them even if it is by means of video. What is striking, as Carl Trueman has noted, is that none of the churches providing video preaching also provide music via video. Some musicians, choirs and praise teams are more gifted than others, right? The communal uniqueness of song in our worship gatherings is ordinarily acknowledged but we have relegated preaching to a simple function of conveying information. Actors and disembodied sermons are inadequate imitations of the genuine face-to-face gospel utterance described as preaching in the Scripture. The face-to-faceness of preaching is the reason D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones disliked tape-recorded sermons, referring to them as a "peculiar and special abomination" because, in his thinking, they sever the living transaction between preacher and congregation.

Every person lives based on an eschatology. We all fit today's decisions into a story that is headed somewhere. Biblical preaching confronts rival eschatologies. Simply passing on information about God abstracted from the biblical storyline that centers on Jesus is inadequate and dangerous, because listeners simply incorporate the information into their existing eschatology. All the truths of the Bible fit together in Jesus. Faithful expository preachers call people to abandon the rival eschatology they are ordering their lives on, and trust the gospel story through faith in Christ and his kingdom. Preachers do not echo the story of any culture but rather proclaim the word that comes from outside of us—the word of God. To the degree the preacher is faithful, however weak and unimpressive, his preaching of Christ and him crucified is God speaking to his people. As Gregory Edward Reynolds explains in *The Word is Worth a Thousand Pictures*, "The face-to-face presence of the preacher is a reminder of what is coming (Rev. 22:4). It is a down payment on eschatological glory."

It seems to me that many evangelical preachers are focused on countless lesser things to the neglect of the primary purpose for which they were called. We are right to engage the culture, pursue righteousness through the political structures, and contend for morality in a culture of decadence. But nothing is a greater priority, or will have more influence on the church and the world than faithful proclamation.

Preaching is dangerous—an indispensable act of spiritual war. Martin Luther explained the cosmic combat in the way: "Indeed, to preach the word of God is nothing less than to bring upon oneself all the furies of hell and of Satan, and therefore also of . . . every power of the world. It is the most dangerous kind of life to throw oneself in the way of Satan's many teeth" ("On the Councils and the Church," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*). I fear Luther's words sound melodramatic to many contemporary evangelicals. It is a hollow victory to win the battle for the Bible in the academy only to domesticate it in our pulpits.