

The Indispensable Proclamation of the Word: The Case from Scripture and Theology*

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The critical issue with which I want to wrestle and grapple during these morning lectures is—to put it boldly—“Is preaching to be passé?” Is preaching done for, as many voices around us are telling us? Has preaching had it? Is it to be an endangered species among us? What I want to do in these lectures is to review the case for the ongoing viability of biblical preaching, and more than that, the urgent necessity of biblical preaching in God’s order and plan in all ages and times. That’s the burden that I have on my heart. A very thoughtful observer awhile back wrote these words, and I quote him:

Many today think preaching is outdated. They argue that there is too much preaching and it is of a low quality. So many are afraid of extreme views they take no view of course. We see grave general weakness in doctrine in our time. Many are forgetting the priority of the Word of God in worship. Preachers are involved in too many other activities. No wonder that standards for preaching are in serious decline.

That was J. C. Ryle in 1850. So the question is not a new question.

Preaching has always had its detractors. Premature obituaries have been written for preaching again and again and again. Of course those outside of Christianity do not have any notion whatever of what preaching really is and how important it is. Walt Whitman, called by some, sadly, the great American poet, mocked and scoffed at preaching. 1860s, now I’m quoting him; he said, “It could just as well be that measles and small pox could be cured by sermonizing as to believe souls could be saved by these tactics.” Well, the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. He did not know the difference between his head and a hole in the ground when it actually came down to it as far as spiritual things are concerned. But very unhappily there are some

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among us who trumpet from the rooftops the idea that preaching is basically over. David Maines tells us that within ten years the pulpit in evangelical churches will be replaced by the roundtable on Sunday morning—if it is to be Sunday morning, of course. And experts will sit and engage in dialogue. This will replace the sermon he says. One prominent evangelical denominational leader says that preaching is like the maraschino cherry on top of a chocolate sundae: it isn't absolutely necessary but it is a rather nice conclusion. We've had an interesting series of seminars being offered up in our part of the country. The basic thesis of these seminars is that in the first thousand years of the history of the church it was doctrine. The second thousand years, preaching. Now the third thousand years is going to be worship. I say this is a very serious misreading of the fact. Doctrine, preaching, and worship are indissolubly inter-threaded and linked. You can't have any one of them without the others. But this is the kind of thinking that is quite pervasive and adding to our discomfiture in these discussions. I think most unfortunately, quite obviously, there is at this time a marked decline in the exegetical, theological, and rhetorical quality of evangelical preaching. This is not a great day of preaching. And that fact adds to our burden in restating a case for biblical preaching.

Now I would like to begin just with the words of the apostle Paul which we know so well. Here is the flavor of Holy Scripture with regard to preaching and its place and its importance. This is in 2 Timothy chapter four. The apostle Paul has just shared with his young spiritual protégé that the Holy Scriptures are able to make us wise to salvation; that all Scripture is God-breathed, *theopneustos*, and it is profitable in field after field after field. And then he comes to what seems to be a kind of crowning climax and counsel to this young pastor. Chapter 4:1:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who will judge the living and the dead in view of his appearing in his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word. Be prepared in season and out of season. Correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and careful instruction.

Well there's Paul's admonition and exhortation to Timothy as he brings his thoughts and concerns toward a conclusion.

I want to state two aspects of the case this morning, first from Scripture and then from theology. And I want to assert, first of all, that *we need to feel the pulse of our founding documents*. That's got to be the foundation for everything, it seems to me, that we do and say in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Samuel Freedman is a brilliant Jewish thinker; he's at Columbia University. He has just written a fascinating new book in which this American Jew, not an observant Jew himself, quite liberal, ponders the splintering and the secularization of American

Jewry. And he's pained; he's in agony as he sees what's happening. This is his conclusion. Here is the bottom-line of Samuel Freedman's epical volume. He said,

There is no question the Orthodox are right. It is only fidelity to our founding documents; it is only fidelity to Torah that will save us from the beguilements of a secular culture all around us which are threatening to destroy us. This is the only way we are going to survive. Stay with the founding document.

Now, dear people, here is our founding document (the Bible). I mean this is what states it once and for all. When we turn to our founding document, on the very first page we meet a talkative God. God said; God speaks, and in my view, the communication, that mysterious communication, within the councils of the Triune God-head, they in fact are our charter and our contract for communication. The case begins in Genesis 1. We who are made in the image of God reflect from our great and glorious God, speaking, communicating. He started it. He guarantees it. God said, *dāvar*. And you know that in the Hebrew that's more than just sound waves spinning off into the ether. For the Hebrews a word is a deed. It's an act. Language is performative. And I'm convinced that speech-act theory, taking the author's intention seriously, the speaker's intention seriously, is one of our greatest apologetics against deconstructionism, which so superciliously dismisses an author's intention as unknowable, simply irrelevant. Folks, what a person says is an act and it reflects meaning and reveals something of the character and personality of the one who speaks. Words, language is relative; it's culturally conditioned. But language is sufficient to carry meaning, not exhaustively, but adequately and truly. As anyone of you who translates from another language knows, you don't get it exactly or fully, but you can get it. God speaks his words—personal, powerful, translatable. That's a very important foundation for preaching. God spoke, human beings responded to him in speech. This primary orality was inscripturated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and now in discourse and in preaching it becomes oral once again, secondary orality. But it's all based on the validity and significance of the original communication. And when you stop to think about it in the Vulgate, John 1:1: *In principio erat sermo*—"In the beginning was the Word . . ."—our Lord Jesus, the Word, the communication from God, the Word. And it's an amazing thing when you stop to think about it. The Second Helvetic Confession: *Praedicatio verbi dei est verbum dei*—"The preaching of the word of God is the word of God," i.e. to the degree that a preachment, a sermon, a lesson, a testimony, a message, to the degree that what a human being speaks says what God has said in his word, to that degree

that is the word of God. Now that's awesome. Folks, and this is something which has not changed, nor will it change—praise God.

Well, you go on through the Old Testament and you meet all of these messengers of God. Here's a Moses. Here's a Samuel. Here are human beings who bear the word of God—who carry God's revelation and truth to their times. They speak for God, his word. Then we come to that most amazing aggregate, the *n^ebi'im*, the prophets, who speak for God. What the prophets said, these were more than pep talks to the troops, you know. This was more than just a little adulation and encouragement along the way. The word of the Lord came too, the burden of the Lord, thus says the Lord. I think your Gary Smith's book, *The Prophets as Preachers*, is an outstanding piece. They were preachers to their time in a most extraordinary and incisive way because, of course, they were under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Here's the case for human beings speaking God's word to a generation.

We come to the New Testament—221 references to preaching and teaching. Dear people, this is not a side issue. This is not a peripheral matter. Suffusing all of the New Testament is the paramouncy of preaching and teaching. Thirty-seven Greek words employed to describe differing aspects of communication. John the Baptist came preaching. Our Lord Jesus Christ, God's only begotten son, was a preacher. He said I've got to preach. The book of Acts is full of preaching. Most of it is evangelistic preaching. Folks, here's our charter. Here's the basis for it all. This wasn't an idea somebody had, you know, in the Middle Ages. This is just anchored and rooted in everything Holy Scripture presents to us. "How shall they hear without a preacher?" Paul argues. And the apostles were all preaching. And in my judgment, some of the epistles are quite sermonic, even in their structure and form. We do not stand in the temple-altar priest tradition. We stand in the synagogue pulpit-prophet tradition, the reading of the Scripture and the exposition of the Scripture. That's where we have come from; that's what we are—sharing this word of God.

We, looking back now at 2000 years of Christian proclamation, ask, "How can anyone advance the idea that we are the ones who are going to crack the continuity?" Folks, we are the midgets standing on the shoulders of these giants. And I say it is most presumptuous to argue that we shall cut loose from this heritage. I know you won't and I know I won't.

Our generation is very, very reluctant to accept any inspired universals, any authoritative universals—that just can't be. We're hearing these voices now on every side. I read these in most preaching magazines these days: "pomos," postmoderns won't listen to preaching. You know, propositional communication—coming to an end—linear

reasoning—it's pretty well gone; forget it. My friends, our generation is in a revolt against deduction, against authoritative, revealed universals. We prefer induction and induction has a very important place in preaching. But remember that with our view of Scripture when we have read the text we have announced the conclusion. It is really in no further doubt whatever. It's kind of like in counseling you can be rogerian and non-directive to a point. "Oh you are not feeling well today, I see. It is poignantly painful. I appreciate that, yes." But, you know, at one point we have got to come to "Thou shalt not commit adultery." That's jarring to people who eschew universals. All have sinned. But in preaching we basically begin with the inspired universal and then deductively move from the universal to particulars. Now, I think good preaching is a felicitous combination of deduction and induction because we will seek particularly in the introduction of a sermon; we will seek univocal points of contact with our audience: "There you are . . . come with . . . we will go here . . . we will move there." But folks, this is essentially by its very nature a submission of our wills to a revealed set of universals. And this is where they are. This is an awesome responsibility for a human being to bear the word of God, to stand in a pulpit, and say, "This is what God says. And this is what it means for you and for me today, and for our generation." But it had better be the word of God that we are trumpeting here. I was up in northern Minnesota at a Bible conference once. There was a delightful gentleman and his wife who had as their avocation the feeding of hummingbirds. These little bz-z-z-ts, I think they're just fascinating. And these hummingbirds will come and stick their long proboscii down through these narrow-necked little things and they'll suck up the nectar that has been prepared and provided by these people in this instance. Well the gentleman said to me, "You know, it is a very awesome responsibility to feed hummingbirds." I said, "It is, I have never really pondered that." He said, "You know, as we prepare the nutriment, if we don't give enough nutriment in relation to the amount of water, these birds will drink this not realizing they are being systematically weakened. And if they don't get enough nutriment, over time they will be unable to fly all the way to the south for the winter. I've got to be sure that the ratio of the nutriment is sufficient in relation to the amount of water." I thought to myself, "Week by week, as we share the word of God, is there enough of the word of God in what we are sharing? Is it thin? Is it lacking in substance? Is it too much human speculation? Is it too much stand-up comedian? What is it we are actually doing, occasion by occasion? Are we sharing the word of God?" So, that's my first point in reviewing the case for biblical preaching in our time, in all times. I think we've got to feel the pulse of the founding document. And in my view the founding document is crystal clear—preaching is

important, critical and indispensable. But I want to go on to a second observation.

I think we need to think theologically about preaching. That is to say, *our view of Scripture will determine our view of preaching*. Our view of Scripture will determine our view of preaching. What we believe about revelation and inspiration is going to shape how importantly we regard preaching. If this is the very word of God, if the Bible is always trustworthy, factual in everything that it represents, as I believe it is, then I tell you, the preaching of the word, biblical preaching, is of the utmost importance. But in my view it is not only, I must say, the inspiration and integrity of Scripture which I think is at stake right now. I think we are having a very big battle on the issue of the sufficiency of Scripture. Is Scripture enough? That is to say, a very well known youth speaker, whom I have much regarded I must say, has decided in the last year to move away from the Bible in his youth conferences and to use the tales of Dracula. He says, you know, this is a very interesting change, “creative new possibilities.” My friend, is brilliant creativity the be-all and end-all? I ask you, “Is the Bible one of a number of books sitting on the shelf or is it alone and unique?” Is it the Bible to be replaced by the tales of Dracula when Terry Waite was in captivity in Beirut those seven or so years and never saw another human being? And you remember that, finally, in the last few months of his imprisonment someone slipped him a little transistor radio. And good Anglican that he was he said, “I can’t wait to hear the Church of England hour. I can’t wait! I can’t wait!” And he hadn’t heard Scripture; he hadn’t had a Bible for seven years. And hear comes the Church of England hour in a rather unctuous voice, “Oh my dear friends, I am delighted to share with you today. I want to open my heart to you on some spiritual lessons from Winnie the Pooh.” And I will tell you: Terry Waite just sank. “Dear God,” he said, “I need the word of God. I need Scripture.” And I don’t care how brilliant you are and how creative you are; Winnie the Pooh, Tigger won’t suffice. I love what C. E. B. Cranfield says, whose great commentary on Romans is epical. Cranfield says and he’s right, “This hearing of the Word of God, hearing what the Lord of the church wants to say to his church and to humanity in their actual situations, this is the primary task of the church.” This is our ecclesiology. This is what the church is about, sharing the word of God and the plan of salvation and redemption. This is of the very essence; it’s hearing God’s word. It’s not rearranging, you know, the chairs on the decks of the Titanic. It’s the word of deliverance and salvation. This preaching of the word of God; now I’m emphasizing the more of the word, the better. Let the text shape the sermon. The kind of preaching I like is when the sermon tells us what the text says and means and moves it from then to now. Now that’s preaching. With a

careful hermeneutic—we are not entitled to just do anything we like with the text. There's got to be exegetical integrity. Always was the sense, as Luther said, that the Spirit is in, with, and under the word at every stage in the preparation of the text for preaching. Its reliance upon the Holy Spirit, its divine author, to illuminate and guide our minds and hearts and keep us from going over this edge or that of which there are plenty edges to go over. My friends, I've been preaching by the grace of God well over fifty years. Don't talk to me about the maceration of this preacher. Listen, while my schoolmates, my boyhood friends, are stockbrokers and doctors and lawyers and some unmentionables—listen, by the grace and in the sovereign call of God, this bag of bones and hunk of hair has been allowed to spend just about every one of his days studying the word of God and preaching the word of God. And I've been paid to do it. I mean, such a privilege! Such an honor! I've never been able to understand but then that I should be paid for it. I say, "Praise be to God; the devil's defeated!" And if you are one upon whom the call of God has been placed to prepare, study, and proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, my dear friend, you may not be the elite of the elect, but we are most fortunate and blessed human beings who have this privilege. And let's never forget it because this preaching of Christ is God's order for this time and until the Lord returns; do not doubt it. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to New York City to study just before the Second World War, this man who wrote *Cost of Discipleship* and who in other books I don't always understand, this man had a hunger for the word of God. And he went to all of the stylish, elitist, Fifth Avenue churches in New York City. And he saw beautiful form and he heard well-chosen words magnificently presented. But he went from church to church and he left starved. He was hungry—it was ashes; it was sawdust; it was of man and of the flesh. It was brilliant, but it was unenlightened. Then he found a little church at Eighty-First and Broadway. It was the old Broadway Presbyterian Church. It was the maverick in the New York Presbytery. And there was a little Scotsman there by the name of John Macomb, insignificant and unimpressive in appearance and delivery. But Bonhoeffer describes his experience as Lord's Day by Lord's Day he came to the Broadway Presbyterian Church and this little preacher. He just opened up the Scripture and he began at the beginning of a text and he did what ought to be done and he moved on toward the end of the text. And he shared the word of God; he just opened up the word of God, and Bonhoeffer said it was a feast—it was a feast. John Macomb and his second wife, after his first wife passed on, his second wife was a Regius professor of education at the University of Minnesota. And they would attend the congregation I was privileged to serve many years in downtown Minneapolis. I'd look out in my gallery to the right and I'd

see Dr. and Mrs. Macomb. I'd say,

O, dear Jesus, I pray, I long for, I passionately want dear God, people who come under the preaching of this pulpit to experience what John Macomb shared with Dietrich Bonhoeffer—that folk won't go out saying, "Well, there was a lot of commotion; there was a lot of movement, but my soul is starved."

Dear people, you know no matter what we believe about the Bible, if we don't in fact preach the Bible, what is it? What is it? This wonderful word—praise be to God—what a treasure, our supernatural miracle book, the Bible, able to make folk wise to salvation. And we have the privilege of sharing it. Well, in some brushstrokes, I have shared with you the beginnings of a biblical case and a theological case. What I want to do tomorrow, God-willing, is share with you the case from 2,000 years of the history of preaching. What does the actual doing of it show us?

Dear God, have your way with us. Have your hand on us. Bless each of us here bowed before you. When so many shrill and strident voices tell us it's all over and ours is just an unctuous pursuit of the futile, O Lord, we believe you, believe your word, trust in your Spirit and rejoice. But forever, O Lord, is your word settled in heaven. You have magnified your word above your name. You have entrusted to us this precious word. Dear God, may we be found faithful in sharing it. I pray in Jesus name. Amen.