



The Reformation And The Return To Preaching

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October was always a significant month for me as a kid. It contained one of my favorite holidays - Halloween. Halloween meant one full night of begging candy off friends, family, and neighbors. I could easily fill a one-gallon pail with chocolate bars, caramel apples, and popcorn balls. Popcorn balls were just space fillers so I would toss them on the floor of the car right away lest homeowners suspect that we had too much candy and decide to be a bit stingy with the goods. I loved October 31st.

As a believer, October 31 has an entirely *different* significance which is all but ignored and lost in most churches. Our family doesn't go trick-or-treating. Nor do we spend our time focusing on "the evils of Halloween." Instead we make it a day of celebration! We go out to dinner at our favorite local restaurant (Jalapeños). When we get home we watch the old black-and-white classic movie *Martin Luther* and then our evening family Bible study centers around some significant element of the doctrine of *Justification by Faith Alone*.

Why do we do this on October 31st? Because on October 31st in the year 1517 a catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg to spark public debate. That event officially marks the launch of the Protestant Reformation. The significance of that event cannot be overstated!

Among the many benefits of the Protestant Reformation is the fact that the Reformation marked a return to the primacy of preaching in the life of the people of God.

Preaching in the Early Church

In Acts 2 the church was born around a preaching event. Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost after the coming of the Holy Spirit and gave an exposition of **Joel 2, Psalm 16**, and various other texts. Three thousand people got saved and were baptized. Afterwards they "**continually devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.**"

The story of the book of Acts is a story of the preaching of the early church. Sermons of Peter, John, Philip, Stephen, and Paul take up a major portion of the book.

Early in the life of the church, the Apostles were set apart for the Word of God and prayer (**Acts 6**). Paul continually emphasized the centrality of preaching in his letters, particularly the pastoral epistles (Timothy and Titus).

The early church was a growing, dynamic, powerful force, largely due to the role of the Word of God in the life of the people of God. All that would eventually change.

Preaching in the Middle Ages

About 500 AD, preaching in the church began to wane. What we know as the "Middle Ages" marked a gradual but steady decline in the life of the church.

The merger of Church with State in 313 AD with the Edict of Toleration by the Emperor Constantine marked the beginning of a long steady slide. The church increased in worldly power and influence while it decreased in real strength.

By the time of the Reformation, biblical preaching had reached an all-time low. Clergy, Bishops, and Priests were well established and numerous, but they did not preach at all. It was not uncommon for weeks or even months to go by without a single sermon in a local parish. Oftentimes priests would abandon churches only to check in on them occasionally. The English reformer, Hugh Latimer, called these absentee priests “strawberry parsons” because “they came only once a year and stayed for a very short time.”¹

In the event that a bishop or priest did preach, the quality was insufferably poor. In the course of a worship service a brief time was reserved for the *homily* - a brief sermon.

The priests did not do any of their own study and preparation or give an exposition of the text. Their homilies were for the most part sermons and/or readings borrowed from the early church fathers. Most homilies were topical, filled with stories, fables and anecdotes.

With the Word of God so absent from the church, something had to fill its place. Charles Terpstra notes, “*It is also striking but sad that with the preaching so bad and the people so ignorant, another method of bringing the gospel to the people was being used - drama. Groups of dramatists would travel from town to town putting on mystery plays and passion plays.*”² There is nothing wrong with drama per se, but when it replaces the proclamation of the Word of God - WRONG!

By the 1500s true biblical preaching was no longer central in “Christianity” and had all but vanished.

The Reason for the Decline

Several things contributed to the forming of this desperate situation, but there are three primary factors.

First, a low view of Scripture. With the rise of the papacy between 300 and 600 AD, the Word of God began to lose significance. The people were taught that the Church and the Pope were the authoritative sources of truth. They came to believe that God spoke through

1 Much information contained in this article can be found in an address delivered by Rev. Charles Terpstra available in written form at http://www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_90.html.

2 Ibid.

the Pope. Consequently, the Word of God was no longer viewed as authoritative and sufficient for all of life and godliness. People did not turn to the Word to hear the voice of God, but to the Church, the Pope, and his representatives, the priests. The Pope and priests even went so far as to teach the people that having the Bible in their own language was *dangerous*. When the church no longer believes that “when the Word of God is rightly preached the voice of God is rightly heard” they will neglect the Scriptures. The Bible disappeared from the lives, the minds, and the hearts of the people.

Second, false doctrine abounded. When the Word of God was taken from the people of God, it left the sheep unable to defend themselves from the ravages of false teachers and their teachings. Falsehood swept the church. False doctrine, practices, and superstitions became entrenched as dogma. True biblical preaching would pose a threat to the false doctrines and so it was neglected.

Third, the laziness of the “shepherds.” Priests and Bishops did not study Scripture to prepare sermons because study, preparation, and preaching are hard work! It takes hours to study the text, outline the text, research background and history, then to write out a sermon. Preaching itself is an exhausting enterprise! It is far easier to simply tell some stories, moralize an anecdote, and do the Mass.

The Reformers and Preaching

The reformation marked a return to the centrality of preaching because it marked a return to the centrality and authority of the Scriptures. If the Word of God is what it claims to be, then it **mandates** that we proclaim it and preach it.

Once the authority of the Pope was challenged and the legitimacy of the Mass was questioned, then something had to take their place. What would it be? Preaching. The Reformation restored the church to her central task - preaching the Word (**2 Tim. 4:1-5**).

Luther believed that the “true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God.” After posting the 95 Theses, Luther later wrote in his *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, “*One thing and one only is necessary for Christian Life, righteousness and liberty.*”

That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the Gospel of Christ. . . . Let us then consider it certain and conclusively established that the soul can do without all things except the Word of God, and that where this is not, there is no help for the soul in anything else whatever. But if it has the Word, it is rich and lacks nothing, since this Word is the Word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of power, of grace, of glory, and of every blessing beyond our power to estimate. . . . On the other hand, there is no more terrible plague with which the wrath of God can smite men than a famine of the hearing of His Word, as He says in Amos, just as there is no greater mercy than when He sends forth His Word, as we read in Psalm 107.”

John Calvin had an equally high view of Scripture and said in his preaching on Ephesians 4:11-14, “Now the fact is that [the church] cannot be built up, that is to say, it cannot be brought to soundness, or continue in a good state, except by means of the preaching of the Word.”

When the Protestant Reformation was well underway and established, Luther gave all the credit to the power of the Word of God saying, “I have opposed the indulgences and all the papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. . . . I did nothing; the Word did it all. . . . For it is almighty and takes captive the hearts, and if the hearts are captured the evil work will fall of itself.”

Luther’s commitment to preaching was more than mere words. John Piper notes that “in the church in Wittenberg in those days there were no programs, but only worship and preaching; Sunday 5:00 a.m. worship with a sermon on the Epistle, 10:00 a.m. with a sermon on the Gospel, an afternoon message on the Old Testament or catechism. Monday and Tuesday sermons were on the Catechism; Wednesdays on Matthew; Thursdays and Fridays on the Apostolic letters; and Saturday on John.”³

Walther von Loewenich said in his biography, “Luther was one of the greatest preachers in the history of Christendom . . . Between 1510 and 1546 Luther preached approximately 3,000 sermons. Frequently he

preached several times a week, often two or more times a day.”⁴

Reformer John Calvin had just as tenacious a commitment to the preaching of the Word. “To give you some idea of the scope of the Calvin’s pulpit, he began his series on the book of Acts on August 25, 1549, and ended it in March of 1554. After Acts he went on to the epistles to the Thessalonians (46 sermons), Corinthians (186 sermons), pastorals (86 sermons), Galatians (43 sermons), Ephesians (48 sermons) – till May 1558. Then there is a gap when he is ill. In the spring of 1559 he began the Harmony of the Gospels and was not finished when he died in May, 1564. During the week of that season he preached 159 sermons on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, 123 on Genesis and so on. One of the clearest illustrations that this was a self-conscious choice on Calvin’s part was the fact that on Easter Day, 1538, after preaching, he left the pulpit of St. Peter’s, banished by the City Council. He returned in September, 1541 – over three years later – and picked up the exposition in the next verse!”⁵

Both Calvin and Luther established schools in which they sought to train men for the exposition of the Word of God. They believed that the majesty of God is revealed in His Word and that God’s glory was put on display when God’s Word was preached. In his commentary on **Jeremiah 5:13** Calvin writes, “If His word is not allowed to have authority, it is the same as though its despisers attempted to thrust God from heaven or denied His existence. We hence see how the majesty of God is, as it were, indissolubly connected with the public preaching of His truth.”

The Reformation was, therefore, not just a rediscovery of the glorious truth of justification by faith alone, but it was the greatest revival of preaching in the history of the Christian church.

And Here We Go Again

Satan knows no new tricks. We can see the same thing happening in our day as happened in the years preceding the Reformation, promising the same

³ http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/1470_Martin_Luther_Lessons_from_His_Life_and_Labor/

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/1471_The_Divine_Majesty_of_the_Word/

disastrous results. The irony is that it is churches with a rich protestant heritage that seem intent on taking us back to another dark age.

Worship services are packed with announcements, beautiful singing, specials, dancing, videos, dramas, and every conceivable form of entertainment. The one thing that can find no place in the modern worship service is the preaching of the Word!

“Sermons” are called “talks” or “conversations.” We are told they should be short and relevant - geared to a topic of the day. Pastors download their sermons off the internet or buy their outlines and manuscripts from someone else. The hard work of exegesis and exposition is neglected in favor of stories, anecdotes and feel-good, self-help homilies.

Protestant churches have forsaken the sole authority of Scripture and the worship service has become an hour of pandering to people’s flesh instead of preaching in the power of the Spirit. The voice of God is no longer heard in most churches because the Word of God is no longer preached and explained.

Commenting on the dearth of biblical preaching in our own day, one of the greatest expositors of the twentieth century, Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, *“While men believed in the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God and spoke on the basis of that authority you had great preaching. But once that went, and men began to speculate, and to theorize, and to put up hypotheses and so on, the eloquence and the greatness of the spoken word inevitably declined and began to wane. . . As belief in the great doctrines of the Bible began to go out, and sermons were replaced by ethical addresses and homilies, and moral uplift and socio-political talk, it is not surprising that preaching declined.”*⁶ We don’t have to imagine what the results of this trend will be. May God give us the grace to “preach the Word!” PRAY THAT IT BE SO!

Without Wax-



6 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (“Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), pg. 13.