

Preaching Christ

By Michael S. Horton

Part 2 of a 6-part series on Worship

Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Inc –

Reformation was obsessed with true worship, insisting that worshiping or serving God according to one's own whim, imagination, or pleasure, was idolatry. We are sinners--even those of us who have been converted. We are still fallen and our hearts always revert to paganism unless we are constantly confronted with an external Word that tells us the truth about ourselves and God. We don't really think that we're totally depraved, so the Law comes to us and tells us how bad the bad news really is. But then we don't really think that we can be declared righteous and fully acceptable before a holy God even though we still continue to sin, so the Gospel comes to tell us how good the good news really is. If we don't hear these two words, the Law and the Gospel, as our regular diet, we are not hearing the Word of God, but are settling for the words of men.

Because of our sinfulness, idolatry, and general tendency to twist things to suit our own tastes, the Reformers believed that we had to constantly hear this external Word, standing outside of us, announcing to us that which we may not find acceptable to our sentiments. They believed that the Word had a converting power, as the Law stripped men and women of their pretended righteousness and the Gospel provided them with the righteousness offered in Christ. As Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The Word, when attended by the Holy Spirit, has the power to convert, to bring those spiritually dead to life, and to reconcile sinners to God. One of the confessions of the Reformation went so far as to put it this way: "The preached Word of God is, in a special sense, the Word of God." What the confession meant by that was that preaching was not merely a form of human teaching or moral instruction, much less a pep talk for seekers. Rather, it was and is a converting instrument. God doesn't convert through the 25th verse of "Just As I Am," but through the preached Word of God. When a minister, after hours of faithful laboring over the passage, mounts the pulpit to address God's people, he is not there to give his opinions about the state of the world or tips for practical living; he is there in God's place, as the shepherd, meant to guide the flock of the Great Shepherd to its final destination. He speaks for God to God's people.

That's why preaching is such a serious business...or should be. It's not the preacher's time, but God's time. It's not the preacher's pulpit, but God's. Therefore, it is not up to the preacher, or to the elders, or to the worship committee, or choir director, as to what the people need to hear. It is up to God and the minister must, therefore, discern from careful biblical scholarship what God has to say to his people in this hour.

Some of you will have noticed that I mentioned "biblical scholarship." You might ask, "Surely you're not saying that a preacher has to be a scholar." That's exactly what I am saying. A faithful minister is not someone who crawls out of bed one day and decides that he is called to preach, and gets a few of his friends together to confirm him in his zeal. To be sure, the leading of the Spirit is part of the call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, but it doesn't stop there. If one believes he is led by God to pursue this calling, he must surrender several years to the serious study of God's Word and the tools necessary for rightly dividing it. He must know the proper rules for biblical interpretation. How many cults have been spawned by untrained zealots who couldn't distinguish figures of speech and different literary genres? Further, he must know the languages and be capable, to some

extent, of working through the passages in the original tongue. But that's not all. He must learn church history, to learn from the wisdom and folly of the past. Again, how many strange cults and sects have arisen because Brother Fred thought he was the first person to really understand the Bible, when all he was really doing was reviving a heresy that was over a thousand years old? He must learn the systematic teaching of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, on the most important doctrines, in order to see how they all fit into a constructive unity. Otherwise, he will be unbalanced and confused in his preaching and teaching.

It is a frightful thing to occupy a pulpit for a half an hour or so on behalf of God. That's why the Scriptures warn, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." Teaching is not a right, but a privilege, and not every believer is gifted. If one claims to be gifted, he must demonstrate not only skills in communication, but a knowledge of the Scriptures and the history of Christian reflection. But he must also know something about this time and place. While we don't force the Bible to fit our context, we can't apply the Scriptures to our contemporary situation if we only have a superficial understanding of that context. Too often today, however, the Spirit is either placed over or in opposition to the Word in such a way that sometimes you even get preachers who excuse their laziness for not having prepared a spiritual meal by saying that they wanted to let the Spirit lead. Others may have great learning, but squander it for the porridge of relevance. More than with the illiterate zealots who often presume to speak for God, my patience is thinnest when I encounter men who claim to be Reformed and have a Reformed seminary education, and yet preach a diet of superficial, moralistic drivel that people can get more eloquently presented at the Kiwanis Club.

The purpose of the sermon is not a devotional or inspirational pep talk; nor is it a course in theology or an autobiographical account of the preacher's life and times. It is not a moral lesson in how to be good, nor is it a practical seminar on how to have a happy life. The purpose of the sermon is neither personal self-improvement nor national salvation, but to preach Christ and him crucified. But will that be perceived as relevant, with so many practical problems in our troubled world? Won't they consider such a message impractical and even foolish? And the Apostle Paul answers, "Sure, the Gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God."

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