

Pastor: Preach God!

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Those of us who are called to preach understand, I hope, the privilege and responsibility of our calling. The Apostle Paul charged Timothy, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:1-2). Paul reminds Timothy that he has been charged with the task of preaching the Word. This charge is given to Timothy in the presence of God and Christ; Timothy preaches under their gaze, and must give account to them.

We, like Timothy, have also received a charge. It is appropriate to feel the weight of this task, and to remember that the charge to preach is of divine origin. What an amazing privilege we have! But it is not only a privilege; it is a sacred trust, and a weighty responsibility.

It’s no wonder, then, that those of us who preach also know what it is to feel inadequate, and even discouraged. I can relate to John Ames, the main character in the novel *Gilead*, when he said, “So often I have known, right here in the pulpit,

even as I read these words, how far they fell short of any hopes I had for them.”¹ I am also encouraged to know that I am not alone in feeling this way. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones never thought he attained to the true biblical standard of preaching. After one Good Friday service, he went home and told his wife that he was not preaching anymore. Yet on Easter Sunday, he returned to the pulpit and preached what some considered to be two of his greatest sermons.² Preaching and discouragement go together,³ especially as we grasp the weight of our charge and our own inadequacy. “Who can bear the weight of souls,” Spurgeon asked, “without sometimes sinking to the dust?”⁴

My goal today is not to discourage you, although some of what I

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead: A Novel* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2004), 69.

² Iain H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith 1939-1981* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 379.

³ I once tried to argue that preaching God-centered sermons helps reduce discouragement in preaching. Haddon Robinson countered that preaching and discouragement go together. Given the example of Lloyd-Jones and Spurgeon, I think Robinson is right.

⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (1875-94; rpr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 182.

will say is discouraging. My goal is to remind us of what we probably already know, but what we sometimes forget, at least in practice. I intend to call you back to a fundamental principle of preaching God's Word, and to encourage you as I do so.

But before we get to the encouragement, we must begin by facing up to some difficult facts. But even these difficult facts can encourage us if they lead us to joyful repentance.

Bad News about How Preachers Preach

So let us begin with the bad news. The bad news is really bad: it seems that many preachers simply can't preach. This is, at least, the conclusion of T. David Gordon, who penned a book called *Why Johnny Can't Preach* in 2004 while suffering from cancer. Gordon writes, "I've always feared to state publicly that, in my opinion, less than 30 percent of those who are ordained to the Christian ministry can preach an even mediocre sermon."⁵

We may be tempted to agree with this assessment, surmising that this is true in other denominations and among those with different theology. But Gordon is writing about those who are Reformed and have a high commitment to Scripture. Even if Gordon is wrong in his estimate, he cites others, such as Douglas Stuart of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, who estimates that only one in five can preach.⁶ We should be concerned!

This is horrible, and it's certainly not encouraging to those of us who preach. The disease is serious, especially when undiagnosed. But there is good news: the disease of bad preaching it is treatable, and with the Spirit's help, the prognosis is good. We can

improve as we focus our efforts in two specific areas.

First, some of us need to pay greater attention to how we organize and deliver our material. Many of our sermons are poorly prepared. Our sermons often lack unity, order, and progress. Our listeners are often unable to identify the central message of the sermon. We don't begin and end well, nor do we always pay attention to things like pacing, pitch, and volume.

The good news is that we will improve in all of these areas if we are diligent, persistent, and teachable. We should not ignore the art and science of sermon arrangement and delivery, or dismiss this as worldly or superficial. Iain Murray recounts how Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones changed his view on this topic near the end of his life after listening to other preachers for six months:

There was need, he urged, of more reading but not for gramophone repetition in the pulpit. There had also to be more prayer, more use of history, more anecdotes ('I reacted too much against them') and more confidence: 'There is nobody hopeless in our congregations. All can grasp doctrines. But we have got to cook it well and make it attractive.' 'Use the best language, the best of everything.'⁷

Although preparation and delivery are important, they are not the main problem. We live in an age that emphasizes technique and methodology. We need something that homiletics (the study of the composition and delivery of a sermon) can't touch. In his book on preaching for church revitalization based on Puritan

⁵ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2009), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷ Murray, 604-605.

models, Michael Ross writes, “The crisis of the American pulpit is not one of communication theory, but rather of content, conviction and consistency of theology and life.”⁸ Ross is exactly right.

We need to examine what might be wrong with what we preach. It’s here that the bad news gets even worse.

Bad News about What People Preach

Half a century ago, Donald Grey Barnhouse asked: What would it look like if Satan really took control of a city? His own answer is surprising.

Barnhouse speculated that if Satan took over Philadelphia, all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say, “Yes, sir” and “No, ma’am,” and the churches would be full every Sunday... where Christ is not preached.⁹

Our delivery may be superb; the organization of our sermon perfect. The illustrations may clear, and the content (in some sense) biblical. But if the message of our preaching does not match the message of Scripture, then our preaching is seriously, or even fatally, deficient. Yet many have observed that much of our preaching does not meet even this standard.

David Neff, an editor of *Christianity Today*, tells of visiting a church one summer on his vacation. The first week, the preacher spoke on the story of God’s call to Moses at

⁸ Michael F. Ross, *Preaching for Revitalization: How to Revitalize Your Church Through Your Pulpit* (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2006), 35.

⁹ Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 15.

the burning bush. In this passage, God reveals how he will fulfill his promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through Moses. He also reveals his ineffable name. It is a “pivotal point in the Bible,” Neff writes, “a hinge on which the door of sacred history swings.” The preacher rose to speak on this passage. Moses was afraid to walk through the door set before him, said the preacher, but he walked through it anyway. We must do the same. “End of message,” Neff writes. “No God. No divine plan revealed. No theophany. Just stages in the life cycle.”

The next week, Neff returned to hear a different preacher. The sermon text was the story of Jesus calming the storm, thereby revealing that he is Lord over creation. The preacher chose to speak about the fear of travel. “The sermon many have soothed some fears,” Neff writes, “but theologically it crashed and burned. I didn’t come back the next Sunday.”

Neff argues that these two sermons are not isolated examples of bad preaching. Evangelicals, he writes, often strip miracles of their biblical significance, reduce parables to lessons for effective living, and hand out moralisms and three-step how-to lessons.¹⁰

Neff is not alone in recognizing this problem. Alan Roxburgh writes:

Throughout Western societies, and most especially in North America, there has occurred a fundamental shift in the understand-

¹⁰ David Neff, “Beyond Self-Help Chatter,” *Christianity Today*, October 23, 2000, <http://ctlibrary.com/ct/2000/october23/5.86.html> (accessed April 9, 2009).

ing and practice of the Christian story. It is no longer about God and what God is about in the world; it is about how God serves and meets human needs and desires. It is about how the individual self can find its own purposes and fulfillment. More specifically, our churches have become spiritual food courts for the personal, private, inner needs of expressive individuals.¹¹

In short, much of our preaching has become centred on us instead of God. When this happens, our preaching becomes idolatrous, and the object of our worship changes. This type of preaching is not only sinful, but it is profoundly unhelpful to all who hear it.

The trend toward idolatrous preaching is not a new one. Two decades ago, *Preaching and Pulpit Digest* studied 200 sermons preached by evangelicals. The study analyzed how many of the sermons were grounded in the character, nature, and will of God. Only 19.5% met this test. Reflecting on this study, theologian David Wells writes:

The overwhelming proportion of sermons - more than 80 percent - were anthropocentric. It seems that God has become a rather awkward appendage to the practice of evangelical faith, at least as measured by the pulpit. Indeed, from these sermons it seems that God and the supernatural order are related only with difficulty to the life of faith.

¹¹ Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling!?: Leaders Lost in Transition* (Eagle: ACI Publishing, 2005), 12-13.

He appears not to be at its center. The center, in fact, is typically the self. God and His world are made to spin around this surrogate center, for our world increasingly is understood within a therapeutic model of reality.¹²

It would be nice to think that it is those in other movements who are guilty of this type of preaching. I wish this were so. I know I have been guilty of anthropocentric preaching. It is worth pausing to honestly evaluate the content of our preaching. No matter *how* well we preach, *what* we preach is a critical issue.

Three Human-Centred Approaches

I have observed three approaches to preaching that lead to human-centred sermons.

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Human-Centred Approach 1: Therapeutic Preaching

This preaching focuses on people's felt needs such as how to build relationships, handle stress, manage money, raise children,

resolve conflicts, and have your best life now. In a therapeutic culture, the pressure to preach this way is intense.

Therapeutic preaching, however, comes at a horrible cost. It is often not based on a vision of God and the gospel. It can lead to a self-help approach and narcissism. At its worst, it can resemble a Christian version of pop-psychology, or what one person calls "chicken soup for the

¹² David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 101.

Christian life.” This type of preaching brings to mind “the image of Jesus calling Lazarus from the grave”, write Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk. “Most preaching is about how to cope with a life wrapped in grave clothing that is never removed.”¹³

Haddon Robinson, author of *Biblical Preaching*, recounts hearing a sermon on how to overcome procrastination. He knew they were in trouble, he says, when the first point was to buy a DayTimer. Robinson writes:

The Bible is a book about God. It is not a religious book of advice about the 'answers' we need about a happy marriage, sex, work, or losing weight. Although the Scriptures reflect on many of those issues, they are above all about who God is and what God thinks and wills. I understand reality only if I have an appreciation for who he is and what he desires for his creation and from his creation.¹⁴

I suspect that those who attend the Toronto Pastors Fellowship are not generally guilty of therapeutic preaching, but one never knows. If we do not preach therapeutically, we will be going against the flow. It's worth evaluating how much of

¹³ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 67-68.

¹⁴ Haddon Robinson, “The High Call of Preaching,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 23-24.

our preaching is based on a therapeutic approach.

Human-Centred Approach 2: Moralistic Preaching

This type of emphasizes life application and take-home action steps. Most preachers argue that sermons need to be practical and offer clear application points.

While application is essential, preaching that over-emphasizes application can

lead to serious problems. Application points, by themselves, can lead to application fatigue, in which the listener is overwhelmed with more tasks to put on a list that is already full. Our listeners need a vision of God and his gospel that changes every part of their lives, not just more

tasks to be completed. To-do lists don't change souls.

In Scripture, obedience is always a response to the gospel. Application that is not rooted in gospel leads to pride if the listener succeeds, and defeatism if the listener does not. The law does not give us power to obey its commands; we need good news (the gospel), not just good advice. The Bible does contain commands, but these are always applications of the gospel.

Moralism can creep into how-to sermons (e.g. “Four Steps to Better Parenting”), but it can also creep into expositions of a text. For example, preaching the imperatives of Ephesians 4-6 will be moralistic unless we link the imperatives to the gospel described in Ephesians 1-3. God's gift and his commands (theology and ethics) are always linked.

Moralism can also creep into biographical preaching if we offer characters as examples to emulate. This is the issue of exemplarism, which uses biblical characters as positive and negative examples.¹⁵ It is what Bryan Chapell calls “be like” preaching.¹⁶ Exemplarism is a staple of Sunday School curricula, small-group Bible studies, and sometimes even preaching.

Sometimes Jesus is offered as an example to emulate. For instance, Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is offered as an example of how to defeat temptation. Although we can learn from Jesus’ example, the main point of the Gospel accounts seems to be that Jesus is the true Israel who faced temptation in the wilderness, and passed the test. Jesus succeeded where everyone else has failed. We do not have the power, in ourselves, to emulate his example.

Is there ever a place for exemplary preaching? Aren’t we called to emulate the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, and more?¹⁷ Isn’t Jesus offered as an example of how to endure under suffering?¹⁸ John Frame writes:

The basic point is that when we use examples of biblical characters (as in other situations, e.g. when we seek to make use of the Old Testament law), we should be aware of differences as well as similarities between their situation and ours, and we should also be aware of whether or not Scripture approves of their actions. If Scripture does

approve of their actions, and if their situations are like ours in relevant respects, then it is not wrong to use such examples in preaching.¹⁹

There is some room for using Bible characters as examples, but caution is needed. We need to be certain that this is the intent of the author, and we must be on guard against moralism. When we use Bible characters as examples, we must remember that God is still the hero of every text. Any positive examples “will reveal the presence of God because the human characters act out the scene against the backdrop of God’s promises, God’s enabling power, God’s covenant demands, God’s providence.”²⁰ There are few consistently good characters to emulate in Scripture; almost every saint is presented as tarnished. They are examples of his grace rather than of human greatness. We cannot be the people God desires apart from his enabling grace.

Moralism ultimately fails because it assumes that we can obey apart from the gospel. Instead, our preaching must root obedience in what God has accomplished in Christ. His work is the motive and source of all obedience. Preaching application without gospel is moralistic and fails to transform lives.

Human-Centred Approach 3: Allegorical Preaching

Surprisingly, allegorical preaching is common. For example, preachers use the story of Jesus calming the storm to talk about how Jesus calms the storms of life. They use the story of David and Goliath as an example of how we can slay the giants in

¹⁵ Sidney Greidanus has written about exemplarism at length in his books *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historic Texts* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), and *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988).

¹⁶ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 289-290.

¹⁷ Hebrews 11.

¹⁸ 1 Peter 3:21.

¹⁹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, P&R Publishing, 1987), 198.

²⁰ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 217.

our lives, like fear, cancer, or joblessness. The miracle of the wine at the wedding in Cana is used as a springboard to talk about God's provision when we are at the end of our resources. Or, "If you want to walk on water, you need to get out of the boat!" Elements of the stories - storms, giants, and wine - are taken out of the historical context and made to stand for something else in the listener's life.

The preacher must bring the text into the present. Allegorizing sections passages is a quick way to do this, but it fails to wrestle with the authorial intent and often leads to inaccurate messages. For example, the preacher who says that Jesus calms the storms of life not only misses the purpose and meaning of that text, but promises something that the Bible does not warrant. This is both unbiblical and unhelpful. It misses the plain meaning of the text in its context, and substitutes the preacher's imagination.

There are other ways to preach anthropocentric sermons,²¹ but these three approaches are ones I have observed most often. If we are guilty of anthropocentric approaches, there is hope: God does not despise a broken and contrite heart. My own heart has been broken as I've thought of some of the anthropocentric sermons I have preached. Thank God for repentance and grace.

Four Bedrock Beliefs

I am convinced that the problem is not primarily one of technique. It is a problem of presuppositions. If we preach human-centred sermons, it is because of some

²¹ T. David Gordon also lists introspection and social gospel/so-called culture war sermons in *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, 83-88.

underlying beliefs about relevance and Scripture. If we preach God and his gospel, it will be because we hold to an alternate set of beliefs.

Bedrock Belief 1: A Theology of the Supremacy of God

Our preaching is a reflection of our theology. When our theology begins and ends with God and his glory, so will our preaching. If we have a lesser view of God, then we will speak on lesser things.

In other words, the only alternative to preaching God is to preach idolatry. If we do not make God supreme, then we will make something else supreme in his place. Whatever that is will be our idol. Richard Gaffin writes:

Because we are, each of us, the image of God, we will worship, in fact we must worship, someone or something, either our original, as we should, or, with the illusion

that we are the original or our own ultimate point of reference, ourselves. If the latter, we will give ourselves over, with the full, still efficient resources of our imaging capacities, to some figment, some distorted image, focused on ourselves or on some aspect of the world, ultimately seen as an extension of ourselves. What Calvin observed long ago is no less true today: the human heart, our image-bearing and image-fashioning nature, is an idol factory.²²

²² Richard Gaffin, "Speech and the Image of God," in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple* (Phillipsburg, P&R Publishing, 2004), 186.

This is why theocentric preaching is such an important issue: the alternative is idolatry. It is also why the solution to human-centred preaching begins with worship. Cotton Mather, the New England puritan, alluded to this some 300 years ago when he said, "The great design and intention of the Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men."²³

If we have been guilty of human-centred preaching, then we need not only repent, but worship rightly. If our people are accustomed to human-centred preaching, then we call them back to worshipping the one true God.

Bedrock Belief 2: An Understanding That God is Relevant

It is almost sacrilegious to speak of God as relevant. He is, after all, the measure of relevance. But I wonder if we believe this as much as we think? I have suggested that human-centred preaching is driven by a desire to be relevant. It is almost as if we believe we need to make God relevant somehow to our lives, and that this requires some creativity. On the contrary, nothing is more relevant than God. J.I. Packer writes:

Knowing God is crucially important for the living of our lives...We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentenced yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direc-

²³ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1990), 22.

tion and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.²⁴

It is stunning that God has created us so that his greatness and our deepest needs intersect. God is worthy of our worship; how amazing that this also satisfies our souls!

John Piper writes:

People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure. There are far more popular prescriptions on the market, but the benefit of any other remedy is brief and shallow. Preaching that does not have the aroma of God's greatness may entertain for a season, but it will not touch the hidden cry of the soul: "Show me thy glory!" ...

So I am persuaded that the vision of a great God is the linchpin in the life of the church... Our people need to hear God-entranced preaching. They need someone, at least once a week, to lift up his voice and magnify the supremacy of God.²⁵

If we want to preach in a way that will genuinely help our listeners, then we will preach God. This will not only glorify God, but it will also be most helpful for our listeners.

Bedrock Belief 3: A Recognition That Scripture Itself is God-Centred

When we preach God, we are not imposing some external framework on Scripture.

²⁴ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 14.

²⁵ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1990), 9-11.

We are recognizing the very nature of Scripture.

This may not be obvious at first. People appear on every page of the Bible. God is not even mentioned in the book of Esther. Books like Proverbs seem more practical than theological. A friend once challenged the idea of God-centred preaching, arguing that Scripture itself is largely about people.

This is where we need to understand what it means to be God-centred. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What do the Scriptures principally teach?” The answer is two-fold: “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.” Scripture is about God: who he is, what he has done, and what he requires. This is very God-centred, and yet it also involves us. Our preaching needs to reflect the nature of Scripture.

This is even true in a practical book like Proverbs. It is significant that the core maxim of Proverbs is God-centred: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Again, this illustrates that knowing God is intensely practical. As Packer said, it is crucially important for the living of our lives. It is more practical than trying to be practical!

Please do not misunderstand. I am not saying that we cannot be practical. I am saying that we need to be theological *before* we can be practical. Lee Eclov writes, “Preaching is the work of spiritually civilizing the minds of Christian disciples... The Bible spends much more time on shaping the spiritual mind than commanding particular behavior.”²⁶ Scripture helps us un-

²⁶ Lee Eclov, “The Danger of Practical Preaching,” in

derstand who God is; obedience is a response. Before we get to the response, we need to begin with God.

Bedrock Belief 4: An Understanding of the Gospel

Some people call themselves God-centred; others prefer the term Christ-centred or gospel-centred. I understand that there are some important differences in the way that people use these terms, but there shouldn't be. When we preach the Triune God of Scripture, we are preaching Christ. When we talk about what God has done, we cannot help but speak of the gospel, which is the mystery that has now been revealed. Jesus has taught us that all Scripture is about him; it all points to Jesus and what he accomplished for us

Scripture helps us understand who God is; obedience is a response. Before we get to the response, we need to begin with God.

through his life, death, and resurrection.²⁷ Scripture is a single story with a single Hero.

It is crucial that we preach the gospel from all of Scripture. If we do not do this, our preaching may resemble the recent New York Times bestseller, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* by A. J. Jacobs. Jacobs, a secular Jew, vowed to live for a year according to the teachings of the Old and New Testament. He applied each passage with some understanding of its intent for the original audience. This type of application, however, is incomplete. It misses the redemptive storyline. It's like focusing on one scene in a movie without understanding the plot line of the whole film. Without the gospel we may

The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2005), 317, 319.

²⁷ Luke 24:27.

understand something of God from Scripture, but we will not have grasped how each part fits into the larger picture.

Preaching God requires that we hold to these beliefs. We must ourselves be consumed by God's supremacy. We must understand that what we need most is to know who God is. We must understand that Scripture is his revelation, and we must be gripped by his gospel. When this happens, it will be hard to preach anything but a God-centred sermon.

Shaping Our Practices

These four beliefs will shape the way we exegete and preach Scripture.

First, these beliefs will shape our exegesis. Exegesis involves studying the text: examining the context and structure, and examining the passage using literary, grammatical, and historic-cultural interpretation. In exegesis, we try to understand the meaning of the text, and the author's intent in writing it.

As we prepare God-centred sermons, our exegesis must ask three questions of the text. First, "What is the vision of God in this passage?"²⁸ What does it reveal about God's character, acts, grace, and will? God is present in every text, even if the text does not explicitly mention him.

Second, what "aspect of our fallen condition [in the text]...requires and displays God's provision?"²⁹ Robinson writes:

This human factor is the condition that men and women have in common with the characters in the Bible. The human factor may show up in sins such as rebellion, unbelief, adultery, greed, laziness, selfishness, or gossip. It may also

show up in people puzzling about the human condition as a result of sickness, grief, anxiety, doubt, trials, or the sense that God has misplaced their names and addresses. It is this human factor that usually prompted the prophets and apostles to speak or write what they did.³⁰

Third, how does the gospel relate to this revelation of God and our fallen condition? This is where we get to the gospel. Tim Keller has observed that many of his sermons are like Sunday school lessons until they get to Jesus. When our preaching reveals God, reveals our need in relation to God, and then takes us to God's provision for that need in Christ, there is a power that cannot be found in human-centred preaching.³¹

Second, these beliefs will shape our homiletics.

Once we identify the meaning and purpose of the text, and identify the vision of God and how that vision meets our need as fallen creatures, we must structure the sermon to reveal the need exposed in the passage, encountered in the people before us, and how it is met in God. This takes pastoral sensitivity and a commitment to accurately communicate Scripture to real people.

Since Scripture reveals God's saving acts, culminating in Christ's accomplishments at the cross, we are essentially applying the gospel to every need. Every sermon becomes an exposition of the gospel. However, we do not apply the gospel in a rote manner. The vision of God, and

³⁰ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 94-95.

³¹ Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching* is very helpful here. I have really benefited from a series of lectures that Tim Keller gave at Gordon-Conwell Seminary called "Preaching to the Heart." The CDs are available at http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/store/product_info.php?products_id=253.

²⁸ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 94.

²⁹ Chapell, 270.

the human factor raised in the text, provide fresh avenues to communicate the gospel to a variety of human situations faced by the people before us.

We also need to remember that we are not simply conveying information. Reflecting on the example of Jonathan Edwards, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said:

The first and primary object of preaching is not only to give information. It is, as Edwards says, to produce an impression. It is the impression at the time that matters, even more than what you can remember subsequently. In this respect Edwards is, in a sense, critical of what was a prominent Puritan custom and practice. The Puritan father would catechize and question the children as to what the preacher had said. Edwards, in my opinion, has the true notion of preaching. It is not primarily to impart information; and while you are writing your notes you may be missing something of the impact of the Spirit. As preachers we must not forget this. We are not merely imparters of information. We should tell our people to read certain books themselves and get the information there. The business of preaching is to make such knowledge live.³²

When people encounter God, and the knowledge of the gospel lives as it is presented to them, then listeners are helped on the spot. When people encounter Christ, it will be enough to change them. T. David Gordon writes:

³² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Jonathan Edwards and the Crucial Importance of Revival", 1976, <http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org/articles/full.asp?id=271281718> (accessed April 9, 2009).

Fill the sails of your hearers' souls with the wind of confidence in the Redeemer, and they will trust him as their Sanctifier, and long to see his fruit in their lives. Fill their minds and imaginations with a vision of the loveliness and perfection of Christ in his person, and the flock will long to be like him. Impress upon their weak and wavering hearts the utter competence of the mediation of the One who ever lives to make intercession for them, and they will long to serve and comfort others, even as Christ has served and comforted them.³³

Conclusion

I began this paper with some bad news, but I finish it with very good news. We have been entrusted with the sacred charge: preach the Word! If we are faithful to this charge, it will mean that we preach God and his gospel.

There is no indication that we need to be extraordinarily gifted in order to do so. God has used some of the humblest preachers in profoundly unexpected ways.³⁴ We possess a message that people desperately need, and we have the joy of helping them discover the greatness of God and the riches of the gospel. Not only this, but we have the Spirit's help.

So pastors, preach God! Proclaim his greatness. Let your hearers be captivated by the glory of God, and gripped with holy fear as they encounter him as he is

³³ Gordon, 78.

³⁴ Spurgeon was converted under the preaching of a substitute preacher, a "thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort." Spurgeon says, "Now, it is well that preachers should be instructed, but this man was really stupid. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason he had little else to say." The impact of this man's preaching was profound. See C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography Volume I: The Early Years 1834-1859* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), 87.

revealed in Scripture. Help your listeners understand who they are in relation to God. Help them identify and dethrone idols. Restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men. Take Martin Luther's advice and beat the gospel into their heads continually.³⁵ Let them see Christ and his excellent provision, which not only provides forgiveness to sin but power to live. Rely on the Spirit's help. This is the type of preaching that our world desperately needs.

³⁵ Martin Luther, *Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co., 1860), 206.