

## INTRODUCTION

# THE SIMPLICITY OF PREACHING

### *Seeing, Savoring, and Saying the Word of God<sup>1</sup>*

The act of preaching is a peculiar act. A man sits at a desk and studies an ancient book. He is preparing for the weekend while most people are working in order to take the weekend off. But on Sunday, the preacher's moment arrives. He gathers with God's redeemed people who have gathered to worship King Jesus. At a precise moment in the service, the man ascends a stage, stands behind a pulpit, opens his Bible, takes stock of his notes, and begins to proclaim, "thus saith the Lord." His aim is to help God's people understand what God has said and how it applies to their lives so that they grow in their knowledge of God and are equipped to live for his glory. To the non-believing world, this is a strange act indeed.

There are other venues and events where people deliver speeches and speak to crowds. But on Sunday mornings, in Christian churches across the globe, you find this peculiar act. This exposition of the Bible, through which God's

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is adapted from my (Jonathon) article at Desiringgod.org, "A Simple Formula for Effective Preaching," (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-simple-formula-for-effective-preaching>).

people worship, “is a unique kind of communication. It is something not brought from the world into the service of the church. Nor can the world take it from the church and use it for its own purposes. It is different, radically different, from anything in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet, to those outside the church, this act of preaching seems like a practice Christians have foolishly carried over from a bygone era. Sure, unenlightened people in the past thought it was necessary. But the modern man seemingly knows better. People today have made too much progress to believe that an ancient book is divinely inspired and therefore relevant to the modern world, right? What would a document that’s over two thousand years old, full of outdated religious ideals, have to say to people living in the twenty-first century anyway? At least that’s the type of thinking produced by a world that has never been given eyes to see. We are not surprised by such sentiments.

But lost people are not the only ones who question the value of the sermon. Preaching has fallen out of favor in various churches, too. The reasons are complex, to be sure.<sup>3</sup> But one reason is because other things have crowded preaching out. Instead of churches giving the lion’s share of the gathered time to the exposition of the Bible, they opt for more singing, or deploy more multimedia strategies, or simply shorten services altogether. Or, churches give more time to baptism or the Lord’s Supper. So, in one sense,

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2 John Piper, *Expository Exultation: Christian Preaching as Worship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 305.

3 Martyn Lloyd-Jones noted this decline in preaching during the twentieth century and offered his analysis of why preaching had fallen out of favor. See D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 17–32.

other good things have been pressed into our services and pushed preaching out, or at least out of the center. Writing twenty years ago, Albert Mohler noted this reality. According to Mohler, in the contemporary church “we notice the exhaustion of preaching that has taken place in so many pulpits...rarely do you hear a church described, first and foremost, by the character, power, and content of its preaching.”<sup>4</sup>

So, the lost world doesn’t understand the value of gathering and listening to someone explain the relevance of an ancient text that claims to be the Word of God. It simply does not make sense in this modern and enlightened moment. Christians, too, wonder if there aren’t better ways to spend our time on Sunday. Maybe more singing, or increased time given to the ordinances, or perhaps shorter services.<sup>5</sup> Whatever one chooses, surely the preacher can get his part done in fifteen minutes rather than thirty-five or forty, right?

Yet, even as we write these words, we feel the need to affirm what seems to be a resurgence of preaching. Is this a contradictory point to what we’ve written thus far? We don’t think so. It’s true that preaching is out of vogue in various corners. It’s also true that certain streams of Christianity

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4 R. Albert Mohler, *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, a division of Ligonier Ministries, 2020), 6–7.

5 Lloyd-Jones noted this reality in his day as well. He writes, “there has been this tendency; as preaching has waned, there has been an increase in the formal element in the service” (*Preaching and Preachers*, 24). It is my (Jonathon) opinion that giving increased space to other elements of worship, like the Lord’s Supper, reading Scripture, and singing spiritual songs, is a good thing. What the church needs to guard against is letting these other elements undermine the primacy of preaching.

are giving more “airtime” to different means of grace (e.g., the Lord’s Supper). At the same time, it’s true that other Christian streams have witnessed a recovery of biblical exposition. There are a few reasons why we think this is a fair point.

First, organizations like *Simeon Trust* and *9Marks* have helped encourage men to take the task of preaching seriously and to make it central to church gatherings. Second, certain seminaries like Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minnesota and The Master’s Seminary in California are giving significant energy to training a generation of men who can rightly and ably handle the Bible, specifically in terms of preaching. Finally, the number of books that call for the faithful exposition of the Word of God is not lacking.<sup>6</sup> So, while it is true preaching has fallen out of favor in some ways, and we should work wisely against such a slide away from the centrality of preaching, we must also thank God for how he is working through various means to encourage thousands of faithful men to ascend pulpits and feed the flock of God from the Word of God.

### WHY A BOOK ON PREACHING, AGAIN?

Yet, the fact that there are already a number of books and resources on preaching begs the question: Why write another preaching book? That’s a good question and one we

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6 For example, John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, Rev. ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004); Jason C. Meyer, *Preaching: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Christopher Ash, *The Priority of Preaching* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland, London: Christian Focus; PT Media, 2010); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach: Theology Meets Practice*, IX Marks (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2012).

needed to wrestle with before undertaking this project. In short, we are convinced that a fresh look at the preaching task from our vantage point would serve the church of today. Our aim is not to write a book that answers every question about preaching. Instead, our purpose is to help preachers understand the fundamentals of the preaching task. Returning to the fundamentals from time to time, reminding ourselves of our basic undertaking, is a wise strategy for faithfulness. This often happens in sports, even at the professional level. Spring training rolls around and professional baseball players rehearse the fundamentals of the game. They field routine ground balls, take fly balls in the outfield, and practice their swing. Basketball teams run basic dribbling drills, work on shooting motions, and walk through offensive and defensive plays. In the same way, returning to the fundamentals of preaching is a good idea for the preacher, whether he is a veteran or novice.

The reality is, given the number of resources on preaching we have today, a preacher could become overwhelmed when trying to read and study the preaching task. The desire to improve may launch the pastor into a labyrinth of articles that clouds his mind. In addition, the internet delivers an onslaught of preaching examples, with each preacher bringing their own peculiarities and personality to the preaching moment. Given all the articles, blogs, books, and preachers in our faces, it serves a pastor well to step back and review the basics. Therefore, in order to help pastors understand or perhaps simply remember the fundamentals of preaching, we've come up with three simple ideas that we want to drive home in this book. But before we turn to those ideas, we want to say a word about the seriousness and simplicity of preaching.

### THE SERIOUSNESS AND SIMPLICITY OF PREACHING

It is an amazing thing that the God who spoke the world into existence has spoken to his people in a book. Think about that for a moment. The invisible God has revealed himself through the writings of men who were moved along by the Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). What grace! What mercy! What wonder! If you are not amazed by this, then preaching the Bible is not something you should take up. We suggest that you find something else to do.

But if you're convinced the Bible is God's Word and you are called to preach that book, then you should have a clear understanding of what you're doing and how serious the work ahead is. To state the matter simply, we believe preaching begins in the heart of a man divinely awakened from the dead. The man who was once blind is now able to see. The man sees God and his Christ and loves what he sees. This man also comes to see the Bible as the Word of God. The divinely designed book comes alive to the man who has spiritual eyes (1 Cor. 2:10). It is food for the soul and sweeter than honey (Ps. 19:10). This is the fountainhead of preaching. A divinely given surety that the Bible is God-breathed revelation. Without the conviction that the Bible is God's Word, the motivation to go to the Bible and study the Bible and meditate on the Bible and then stand to proclaim the Bible will wax, wane, and finally slip away. We preach the Bible not because it is merely a historic document, but because we are convinced that the Bible is the *ipsissima verba dei*, the very words of God.

In addition to being the Word of God, the Bible is also a sufficient guide for every area of our lives. Paul says Scripture is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Though we can

learn from various other sources, the Bible is enough to teach us the saving news of the gospel and how to live lives that are worthy of it. But the Bible doesn't simply guide us. God works through the Word to change us. The Spirit-wrought transformation that takes place in the life of a believer as they read the Bible and sit under biblical preaching is an amazing reality. Through the preaching of the Word and by the power of the Spirit, people see and savor Christ, are transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18), for their joy and God's glory. In other words, the Word of God has a sanctifying effect (cf. John 17:17).

If the Bible is used by God to shape a people for his own glory, and part of the way God does this work is through the preaching of the Bible, then the man who preaches is one who undertakes a massive responsibility. Preaching isn't a game. We don't play at proclamation like we might play a sport. For a while I (Jonathon) had the opportunity to participate in amateur boxing. The gym where I trained was located on a university campus. I would often see fresh faces at the start of a new school year. Those of us who had been around awhile would watch as guys walked in the doors for the purpose of giving boxing a try. They had watched Mike Tyson, or Roy Jones Jr., or old replays of Muhammed Ali and thought boxing looked fun. It was particularly interesting to watch the weight-lifting behemoths walk in. Their large arms, chiseled chests, and washboard abs were sure to conquer their opponents. But the games really began when we let them in the ring. Some guys were simply impatient. They didn't want to put in the time to learn the basics. They wanted to spar. And when I was in my early twenties, I was happy to put on the gloves, lower the rope, and let them climb in. It became apparent rather quickly that, without

proper training and skill, big muscles didn't mean much. You don't play at boxing, regardless of how large your biceps are. This was serious stuff and real damage was possible (and sometimes a reality).

In much the same way we can say that preaching is serious business. It really does help people. At the same time, if exercised without biblical wisdom and skill, preaching can cause massive amounts of damage. In this book, though we want to distill preaching down to the basics, we do not for one second want to diminish the weightiness of preaching.

So, though preaching is serious, we don't believe it is fundamentally complicated. Yes, there are complicating factors to consider when thinking through what to say and how to say it. Yet, while preparing and delivering sermons includes complexity, understanding the basic idea of preaching is not tremendously difficult. Again, it is our contention that, at the bottom, at the most foundational level, *preaching flows from a man who has seen great things in the Bible, has savored what he has seen, and is eager to stand before God's people to say what he saw.*

If that is true, then preparing to preach is a relatively simple process. That doesn't mean that preparation is easy. Preparation is hard work. But the process is relatively simple. Great preaching flows from seeing great things in the Bible. Therefore, you must read and study and think over the Scriptures until they yield sight. You need to see what God has said. And when you see—by the power of the Spirit—your heart should sing. By God's grace and with his help, you will not simply see great things, you will savor what you see. Then, after you have gone to the Bible and it has yielded sweet and glorious truths, you take time to think over how to tell others what God has shown you and how it applies