



A Reformation Of True Preaching

John H. Armstrong

The centrality of preaching came to the forefront early in the sixteenth century as winds of reformation and revival swept through the church in Europe. This was *generally* true in all the lands touched by the Protestant Reformation. It was *especially* true in Geneva where John Calvin made preaching the Word the dominant passion of his ministry for nearly twenty-five years. His labor for reform was chiefly the labor of a faithful pastor-preacher.

When Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541, after an absence of several years, he helped to organize the churches of the city by writing the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. This work outlined the duties of pastors very specifically. It called for reform in the nature and practice of pastoral ministry as the divinely appointed means for reforming the church. The *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* suggested that preaching should take place twice on the Lord's Day and daily the other six days of the week!

Believing that the principal work of pastoral ministry was preaching the Word, Calvin, Luther and lesser known Reformers universally sought to train preachers who could handle the languages of the Bible and exegete the Scriptures with care. Ministers were to be trained in sound theology so they could preach faithfully. The ultimate end of formal training, in other words, was to equip preachers!

How different this picture is from our own time. We reaped the fruit of this Reformation tradition for centuries. This fruit has now been picked and the foundations laid centuries ago are being destroyed. Our celebrated postmodern age values opinions, not doctrinal preaching. And the church is following the pattern of this age, not the pattern of sound words revealed in Holy Scripture. Believing that ours is a word resistant culture, many have come to think of sermons as outmoded and anachronistic. Indeed, one can go from church to church, week after week, in cities and towns across America and find little preaching that sounds like a word with authority from God.

It is the conviction of the editorial staff of this publication that when preaching goes out the tides of blessing go with it. In the sixteenth century, faithful preaching marked the Reformation, as we have noted. So was the seventeenth-century Puritan movement. And great preaching and preachers such as Edwards, Whitefield and Wesley likewise marked the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century. The simple fact is this: When God moves across the church with refreshing winds of renewal he always does it by means of God-fearing, Spirit-filled preachers and preaching. This can be seen in the past but it can also be seen in parts of the world in our own time.

The image of the pastor has undergone a radical shift in our time. Is the minister a cheerleader for the church, someone who makes us feel good about ourselves? Or is he a coach who sends in the plays and directs the team in its work? Maybe the pastor model we need is that of a therapist, a warm helper who guides us through our personal trials? Church growth proponents tell us the best minister, in a growing church, should be a "rancher," a kind of big-time CEO. Is this the image we wish to convey of pastoral leadership and ministry? Make no mistake about it: The idea of a person called by God, set

apart by the church to be a servant of the Lord and a steward of the Word of God, is fast fading into the distant historical past.

But what is preaching? The consistent definition, adopted throughout this issue, is this: True preaching is verbal proclamation, by the church, of the whole message of the Bible (i.e., “the whole counsel of God”). But how does the church preach? I answer that this is done by the church giving itself to rightly preparing ministers of the gospel set apart by the Holy Spirit and approved by the church. This means that matters like calling, training and sending are very important.

It must be understood that true preaching is a gift from God. It works miracles of faith in the hearts of those who hear. By the Spirit’s work, preaching molds the character and decision-making of those whom the Spirit moves by the spoken word. In theological language, true preaching “works faith in the hearts of the hearers.” We do not always know how this is done, or even what will be done on certain occasions, but it is done and the Spirit does it.

The Reformers understood all of this quite well. The *Heidelberg Catechism* puts this well:

Q. 65. You confess that by faith alone you share in Christ and all His blessings: where does that faith come from?

A. 65. 1) The *Agent* of faith is God the Holy Spirit (see John 3:5). 2) The home of faith is the human heart. 3) The tool for *creating* faith is preaching, while the instrument for confirming faith is our use of the sacraments (see Matthew 28:19–20 and Romans 10:14).

Observe that preaching is God’s tool for creating faith. Faith is not presumed without preaching. These theologians understood the dynamic nature of preaching in a way that has been clearly lost upon most of our generation. Most moderns can “take it or leave it” when it comes to preaching. Or, so they reason, while all along their faith is failing in critical ways.

Some of the most instructive words on the power and practice of preaching ever written come later in the same *Heidelberg Catechism*. We read:

Q. 83. What are the keys of the kingdom?

A. 83. The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance. Both preaching and discipline open the kingdom of heaven to believers and close it to unbelievers.

Please note what is said here. The Bible alone does not open the kingdom of heaven to believers, not by itself. Nor does the minister, or the preacher of the Bible open it. The framers of this catechism were very precise, intentionally so. It is *preaching* that opens the kingdom to those who receive it in faith.

Sadly, in the West, with its long heritage of great and culture-shaping preaching, the work of good preaching has suffered the woeful loss, and this in the household of its own friends. David Wells, in a message given to the National Association of Evangelicals several years ago, noted that the church has lost what he calls a “vivid other worldliness.” This consists in two things Wells singles out—a lost word and a lost vision. He gets to the real issue in recovering the kind of preaching that brings true reformation by writing:

... the problem is not that we do not *hear* the Word of God at all. It does not rest consequentially upon us. It does not cut. It is surely one of the great ironies of our time that in the 1970s and 80s so much effort was put into defining inspiration and looking at what were the best words to express and protect it. And while all of that work was going on, unnoticed by us, the Church was quietly unhitching itself from the truth of Scripture in *practice*. Biblical inspiration was affirmed but its consequences were not worked out for our preaching, our techniques for healing our own fractured selves. These all happened largely without the use of Scripture. It is as if we think that while the Bible is inspired, it is nevertheless inadequate to the tasks of sustaining and nourishing the twentieth-century Church! It is almost as if God, who inspired the Word could not see what was coming in the late twentieth century! The result of this divine myopia is that he has left us with something that is inadequate to the great challenges that we face today.¹

Wells opines that if we do not regain "the lost Word" we will lose our capacity to be the people of God and thus will set ourselves "on a path that leads right into the old discredited liberal Protestantism." The only solution, he offers, is to make "ourselves once again captives to the truth of God regardless of the cultural consequences."² What I am suggesting, by the very theme of this issue, is that this will happen only when the church regains confidence in the preached Word! Only as the community of faith gathers to commune with God, to break bread together, to pray for one another and to hear God speak in his preached word will we regain the vision needed to trust God in the face of cultural collapse and moral breakdown. Only by regaining confidence in the preached word and in the church gathering to hear God speak in this manner will we be collectively granted the faith we need to obey the Lord. These are dark times and the faint of heart will not easily survive. How will we respond?

About the Author

John H. Armstrong is president of Reformation & Revival Ministries and serves as editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal and Viewpoint: A Look at Modern Reformation & Revival in Our Times*, a bimonthly magazine sent free upon request. A frequent conference speaker, John devotes his energies to the goal of strengthening churches through its pastors and leaders for the purpose of biblical reformation. He is the author/editor of seven books and has contributed to a number of published volumes. He lives in Carol Stream, Illinois, with his wife Anita. John and Anita have two adult children and a granddaughter.

Notes:

¹ David F. Wells. *The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 1995), 10.

² *Bleeding*, 11.