

THE REFORMATION OF THE PULPIT —THE MOST URGENT NEED OF THE HOUR —

“The most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and the most urgent need in the Church, it is the greatest need of the world also.”¹

❖ D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

Martin Luther, the thundering German Reformer of the sixteenth century, was once asked at the end of his life to look back upon his history-altering ministry and explain the Reformation. *How* could he account for the history-altering effect of this religious movement? *How* could he explain the Roman Empire being brought to its knees? The answer Luther gave is revealing. The simple explanation he offered was a testimony to the power of Scripture.

The Reformer said: “I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And when, while I slept....the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.”²

Luther *is* correct. He personally did nothing of any lasting effect. Rather, the Reformation can only be explained by the ministry of the Word of God. What altered the course of human history? It was the Word—translated, taught, and preached—that sparked the events of the Reformation. There is no spiritual power in this world that can rival the supernatural dynamic of a man who faithfully expounds the Word of God. *Nothing* can compare with the mighty impact of biblical.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 9.

² Ernest Gordon Rupp, *Luther’s Progress to the Diet of Worms 1521* (London: SCM, 1951), 99.

If we are to see another Reformation in our day, there must be the reformation of the modern pulpit. There must be a return to expository preaching. As a result, the singular importance of biblical preaching cannot be overstated. As the pulpit goes, so goes the church. With such an importance assigned to biblical preaching, let us consider some of the salient features of the reformed pulpit.

THE PRIORITY OF THE PULPIT

In a time of reformation, the highest priority for any pastor or church once again becomes the pulpit. All other aspects of the pastorate play a supportive role to what is primary, namely, the preaching of the Word. Paul wrote to Timothy, “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). That is to say, Timothy, first and foremost, must give strictest attention to preaching until Paul could arrive there. If Timothy does anything, he must chiefly devote himself to preaching as a matter of strictest important. So the pulpit must be our chief aim.

This paramount priority of preaching was clearly seen in the public ministry of Jesus Christ. As He launched His work, “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14b-15). Preaching occupied His remaining days on earth. When Jesus sent out His disciples, He commissioned them to *proclaim* the forgiveness of sins (Lk. 24:47). On the day of Pentecost, Peter stood up to *preach*—not to act out a drama, nor to share polite platitudes, but to *preach* the Word. The history of the early church is a chronicle of preaching (Acts 4:2; 5:28, 42; 6:3, 5, 10; 8:35; 11:20; 17:18). The very last words of the apostle Paul to Timothy charged him to “preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2). *This* is the priority of the pulpit.

THE PATTERN OF THE PULPIT

If biblical preaching is so direly important, *how* should we then preach? What should be the *pattern* in preaching? What are the essential components of true exposition? We are not left to guess or surmise. In a reformation, there is a certain *kind* of preaching that occurs.

In 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul articulates three aspects of expository preaching—“the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and to instruction.” Here, Paul gives Timothy and all who will preach down through the centuries, the three non-negotiable parts of preaching that meets with God’s approval. These three components—reading, exhortation, and teaching—are the sturdy pillars upon which all biblical preaching rests. Exclude any one of these three and what results is *not* biblical preaching.

First, *read the Word*. That is, the preacher should publicly read the Word itself. By reading the text at the beginning of the sermon and throughout its delivery, the preacher is putting himself under the authority of Scripture. God’s words are his very words. Further, reading the text signals that his message will flow exclusively from this passage. He has nothing to say apart from his passage. Also, he should read other related cross references, which support and explain this text. His message should be so Scripture-

saturated, that he would be as Charles Spurgeon described John Bunyan, “a walking Bible.”

Second, *explain the Word*. After reading the text, the preacher must give its true interpretation. John MacArthur notes, “The meaning of the text *is* the text.” This involves giving careful attention to the original languages, historical context, authorial intent, cultural background, geography, grammar, syntax literary style, figures of speech, systematic theology, biblical theology, progressive revelation, and more. Incorporating all this, the expositor must present the God-intended meaning of the passage for the clear understanding of his congregation.

Third, *apply the Word*. Having explained the text, the preacher must apply the passage to the lives of his listeners. This is “exhortation” or “the coming alongside of” by the preacher with his congregation, making relevant application of the text. How should these truths be lived out? What does it require of us? Having explained the passage and shown its relevance, the expositor must persuasively call for a verdict in the hearts of the listeners. All such “exhortation” must involve motivation, affirmation, inspiration, consolation, confrontation, correction, and more if it is to be life-changing preaching.

THE PAINS OF THE PULPIT

What is more, Paul wrote to Timothy, “Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to all” (4:15). In other words, biblical preaching is highly demanding and soul-wrenching work. A man must be absorbed, even *consumed*, with this sacred task. The rigors of exposition drain the entire man—mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The preacher’s agony and whole-hearted consumption in this task is the norm for an expository ministry, not the exception.

Of this heavy demand, renowned Presbyterian preacher Bruce Thielemann wrote, “The pulpit calls those appointed to it like the sea calls its sailor; and like the sea, it batters and bruises, and does not rest....To preach, to *really* preach, is to die naked a little at a time, and to know each time you do it that you must do it again.”³

THE PREOCCUPATION OF THE PULPIT

Moreover, every preacher must frequently and scrupulously inspect his own personal life, as well as his teaching, if his ministry is to be divinely blessed. Accordingly, Paul instructed Timothy, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” (4:16). Biblical preaching must come from a holy life of that models the message. The preacher *must* be fervent for the glory of God, zealous for the truth of God, and aflame for the souls of men.

In a word, the expositor must be *passionate*. “Nothing,” Richard Baxter said, “is more indecent than a dead preacher speaking to dead sinners the living truth of the living God.”⁴ “Dispassionate preaching is a lie,” R. C. Sproul argues, for “it denies the very

³ As quoted in Ben Patterson, “Heart and ‘Soul,” *Leadership Journal*, Winter 2000, 122.

⁴ As quoted in Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (London: Banner of Truth, 1967), 318.

content it conveys.”⁵ But when the truth is fervently preached through one who is fully absorbed in God’s Word, the ministry will be wonderfully blessed by God, ensuring the salvation of those who sit under its exposition.

A despondent preacher once asked Spurgeon what he must do in order to draw a crowd like those who were coming to hear the master preacher. “Simply douse yourself in gasoline, strike a match, and set yourself on fire,” Spurgeon answered. “Then people will come to watch you burn.” The point was clear. The preacher *must* be ignited with holy passion for God and be consumed with reaching souls *if* others are to be drawn to Christ.

THE NEED OF THE HOUR

If a reformation is to come to the church, it will be preceded by a reformation of the pulpit. A return to preaching—*true* preaching, *biblical* preaching, *expository* preaching—is the greatest need in this critical hour. If we are to see God usher in a time of reformation, there must be a significant alteration of the pulpit. Today’s preaching, which is light, shallow, trivial, man-centered and devoid of Scripture, must become once again weighty, profound, God-centered, and saturated with Scripture.

May God raise up such proclaimers of His divine truth who will preach with growing confidence in the power of His Word. May Christ give to His church again an army of biblical expositors who will proclaim the Scriptures boldly in the power of the Holy Spirit. My brother, may *you* be such a man.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Steven J. Lawson

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 113.