

THE MARKS OF APOSTOLIC PREACHING

*“When the people heard this, they were
cut to the heart and they said to
Peter and the other apostles,
‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”
Acts 2:37*

The Christian church was born at Pentecost, and the very first sermon ever given was by Peter, who stood with the eleven other apostles and, in a loud voice, proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Preaching holds a prominent place in the New Testament, and though it has suffered some image problems over recent years, we must insist on the unique place of preaching for several substantial reasons. From Peter’s ground-breaking exposition of the Word of God, Author and Bible teacher, Charles Price, defined the marks of good apostolic preaching, and why it is absolutely essential, despite a few modern day views to the contrary.

‘Preaching’ is described in some of the more commonly used dictionaries with negative connotations. “Preaching is the discourse on moral or religious topics, especially in a tiresome manner” (Webster’s). “To preach is to give advice in an offensive, tedious or obtrusive manner” (Chamber’s). “To preach is to moralize tediously” (Oxford’s). In the old days, it was customary for someone to stand up and preach, because books were not easily accessible, if accessible at all. Nowadays, we are more sophisticated, educated, democratic, pluralistic, and supposedly wiser, so no one has the right to tell anyone else what they should believe or how they should think. Therefore, preaching is a relic of a bygone age of ignorance, and considered by some to be no longer relevant. Another objection is based on modern theories of communication, and the lecture format, of which preaching falls into, is considered the worst method of communication, because only a small percentage of what is heard is retained.

BUT in Mark 16:15, Jesus gave this command: “Go into all the world and *preach* the good news to all creation.” On the Day of Pentecost, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, set a remarkable example for all who are called to preach from that day forth until Christ returns. Good preaching *is* the exposition of the inspired Word of God, is authoritative in what it declares, and is under the anointing of the Spirit of God. It is designed to enable people to hear the voice of God, beyond the voice of the preacher. When we take the inspired Word of God and the anointing of the Spirit of God for the purpose of hearing the voice of God, something happens. People meet with God, and lives are saved and transformed.

All valid preaching is standing up with the apostles. Throughout the history of the church, they are given a special place of authority. Ephesians 2:20 speaks of the church built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus, Himself, as the chief cornerstone. The compilation of the New Testament, over a 300 year period, was devoted to the Apostles’ doctrine. It is predominately the preserved writings of the apostles, and of Luke and Mark, close travelling companions and friends of the apostles, as were James and Jude, brothers of Jesus. Preaching is the unfolding of the apostolic message, and every preacher needs to ask this question, “Am I standing up with the apostles as Peter did?”

Good preaching is not backed up by Scripture, but comes out of Scripture. There are all kinds of ideas with many different verses that will back them, but the verses are usually taken out of context. The truth must come out of Scripture and not, “here’s the truth”, and then show passages to back it up. James Packer said something like this about Paul’s preaching, which generally applies to all New Testament preaching. “Paul, in his own estimation was not a philosopher, a

moralist, or one of the world's wise men, but simply Christ's herald. His Master had given him a message to proclaim and his whole business was to deliver that message with exact and studious faithfulness, adding nothing, altering nothing and omitting nothing. He was to deliver it not as another of people's bright ideas, but as a word from God, spoken in Christ's name, carrying Christ's authority, and authenticated in the hearers by the convincing power of Christ's Spirit."

The content of good preaching is first connecting with the concerns of the listeners. On the Day of Pentecost, there were those who thought many were drunk, and Peter, understanding their concern, addresses that issue before anything else. A good preacher is "seeker sensitive", which means being in tune with the concerns of the people. "*Ahh, this connects with me,*" and having gained their attention, he speaks towards their interest and takes them to Scripture. To explain the highly unusual events of that day, Peter had quoted from the prophet Joel, and then to David and how he prophesized in the Psalms of Christ's resurrection and exaltation. The purpose of prophesy in Scripture is not to enable us to interpret the future, but to interpret the present as it comes to pass. Having brought the people from their concerns, which Paul connects with, to Scripture, which is his authority, he then takes them to Christ. "Men of Israel, listen to this, Jesus of Nazareth was a man..." and he talks about His humanity, His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and His exaltation to the right hand of God, the Father.

As all roads lead to Rome, all Scripture leads to Christ. Preaching is ultimately preaching about Christ. He is the Truth, which Scripture bears witness to from beginning to end. If it doesn't lead to Christ, then it may be philosophizing or moralizing with suggested ways of becoming a better person, but it isn't preaching. A good preacher will ask, "What is it I am saying about Christ? How is Christ released in this message?" The task of any witness for Christ is not to bring people to Christ, but to bring Christ to people, introduce Him, tell them about Him, and then to leave it in the hands of the Holy Spirit to bring them to Christ.

Good preaching will always have the ring of authority and confidence to it. Peter says in Acts 2:14, "Let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say." In verse 22, "Men of Israel, listen to this." Verse 29, "Brothers, I can tell you confidently." Verse 36, "Let all Israel be assured of this". It isn't the preacher who is making the claim, but the truth he is preaching that makes the claim, and the truth originates from God, Himself, in His Holy Word. G.K. Chesterton said, "Humble and self-effacing we must always be, but diffident and apologetic about the Gospel, never." The preacher can be free, frank and fearless as he declares the apostolic truth.

Jesus talked several times about those who have ears to hear. In Matthew 13:15, He speaks from the Prophet Isaiah, saying, "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes." Hearing God has nothing to do with intellectual ability, but everything to do with the disposition of the heart. Preaching is much more than giving information to people; it has to go through the mind and the heart to the will. It holds a significant message and we all need to have ears to hear.

When the people heard Peter's preaching, verse 37 tells us they were cut to the heart and they asked, "What shall we do?" In other words, this message involves us and we cannot remain passive. What does this mean, leads to an explanation of the Gospel, and what shall we do leads to an application of the Gospel into our lives. In short, Peter answered, "Repent and receive." Receiving the Holy Spirit is in response to our repentance. And that remains both the life-saving and life-transforming message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. By the authority of the Word of God and under the anointing of His Holy Spirit, the Gospel needs to be preached, as Jesus commanded, to the ends of the earth.