



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 16 Issue 40

October 22, 2017

A Theology of Preaching

How important is the pulpit to you? I don't mean preaching or a preacher, but the pulpit as a means of grace given to the people of God for their growth and maturation. The question is rather important. Dr. John MacArthur wrote:

In Scripture, the person of God and the Word of God are everywhere interrelated, so much so that whatever is true about the character of God is true about the nature of God's Word... What a person thinks about God's Word in reality reflects what a person thinks about God. (MacArthur, 2017, p. 70)

In my experience, the same can be said about the pulpit. Practice is always the reflection of

belief. Accordingly, show me an era in Redemptive or Church history where the pulpit is viewed as an impertinence (as something that doesn't matter), and I'll show you a weak, anemic people- a people whose God is small!

Indeed! How you view the pulpit, the importance you attach to it in your life, is of utmost importance!

This is why Ezekiel 33-37 is so important! It was written and given to the people of God right after Jerusalem, the temple, and the nation were destroyed! Accordingly, as a people without an earthly home, which is what we have become in Christ (cf. Philippians 3:20)- how ought they to survive as exiles?! Notice the initial response:

- They first must be watchman when it comes to each other's souls (Ezekiel 33:1-20)!
- Furthermore, they must not be selfish, uncaring, or negligent when it comes to seeking out the weak, hurting, and straying amongst God's people (Ezekiel 34).

And right in the middle of it all is the treatment before us concerning Ezekiel's calling to preach the word of God (Ezekiel 33:21-33). It should be obvious from this that crucial to the people of God fulfilling their pastoral calling in each other's lives is a functioning pulpit! Ezekiel 33 constitutes a theology of preaching and thus an exposé of the ministry and work of a godly pulpit!

Ezekiel 33:21-22 constitutes a most amazing announcement. We begin with the gift-nature of God's Word. When God created the world, He built into creation an active and effective testimony of Himself such that creation bears witness to God.

Psalms 19:1-4a, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. // There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. [Yet] their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world."

What is being described is known as the doctrine of General Revelation which recognizes that this world/creation bears testimony to God. Paul expounded upon this when he wrote Romans.

Romans 1:18-20, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness [that means all men, whether they have heard about Jesus or not. Yet how is this fair?], because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them ['evident' speaks of an incredibly bright light shining in the eyes of man]. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, BEING UNDERSTOOD THROUGH WHAT HAS BEEN MADE, so that they are without excuse."

This is what we mean by General Revelation! The world in which we live testifies to the existence of an awesome, powerful God. Yet that is all that it can do. An important aspect of General Revelation is that it was made for man as man, NOT for man as sinner. General Revelation was enough for Adam and Eve in the Garden to be reminded of the glory and greatness of God *AND SO* the righteousness of His claim of authority over man! In the Garden, this truly was Adam and Eve's greatest need!

Now, in in a fallen world, General Revelation fails to meet man's greatest need. All it can do as we just saw in Romans 1, is condemn!

What is *SINFUL* man's greatest need? To know Jesus Christ; to enter into a saving relationship with Him! That is why God, in His condescending grace, gave a Special Revelation to *man as sinner* which we call the Bible, God's word!

John 5:39, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me."

This entire book was written to proclaim the glorious news of the grace of God manifested in Jesus Christ! To what end?

John 20:30-31, "Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; AND THAT BELIEVING YOU MAY HAVE LIFE IN HIS NAME."

God's word/the Bible was specially design for *MAN AS SINNER*. The greatest need of man as sinner is the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and so the forgiveness of sin, reconciliation to God, and life everlasting!

Consider this truth from another angle.

John 10:10b, "...I [Jesus] came that they might have life, and might have *it* abundantly."

How glorious! Christ came to this earth to grant man re-entrance into the garden of Eden- specifically to enjoy and consume the Tree of Life! To the believers in Ephesus, Christ said:

Revelation 2:7, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God."

Christ came that in saving us, He might grant us the life God created us for. Now as Paul talks about Christians who were "dead even while they lived" (1 Timothy 5:6), how do we come to enjoy this life in its fullness? In His high priestly prayer, Jesus answered that question.

John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, THAT THEY MAY KNOW THEE, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.”

What is eternal life? What in essence is the benefit of partaking in the Tree the Life? It grants to the believer a love-relationship with Jesus Christ... it is one and the same as “knowing” the Lord!

Now, how do we facilitate this “knowing”? By reading, believing, and so heeding the Special Revelation given to us in the word! This is what God told Joshua.

Joshua 1:8, “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”

Life — genuine life, the abundant life — comes as we fellowship with God via His word!

John 20:31, “But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life [life in its fullness, life as God intended] in His name.”

That brings us to the gift-nature of the pulpit.

If all that we need is the word of God, why doesn't God just say, “Read the word” and so forget this thing called preaching? Accordingly, what is a pulpit? Why did God establish it?

As Christians we profess that “all things in Scriptures are NOT alike plain in themselves, NOR alike clear unto all” (WCF 1.7). The Bible in many ways is complicated and needs explanation if we are to understand it. For example, the designation in Hebrews between milk and meat of the word (cf. Hebrews 5:12). This referenced NOT different passages, but different depths of understanding. The word of God is that deep! Think of Peter who struggled to understand the writings of Paul (cf. 2 Peter 3:16)! This is where the pulpit comes in. Consider, after describing the glorious life that is in Christ- that which is the focus and subject of God's word- Paul wrote this in Romans.

Romans 10:14, “How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard [the idea behind ‘hearing’ here speaks of understanding]? And how shall they hear [understand] without a preacher?”

Though the word of God is the product of the condescending grace of God, nevertheless it is NOT easy to understand! Accordingly, God has deigned to give the gift of preaching/teaching to some that they might explain the word of God to all! We see it in...

At the completion of the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, a service of Covenant Renewal was held in which God's people gathered to worship the Lord. At this service, notice what the leaders of God's people did at this time.

Nehemiah 8:8, "And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading."

Herein is the beauty and glory of a pulpit... it was designed by God to explain the word of God that ALL might hear, understand, and be changed thereby! The pulpit is a holy moment in the context of Covenant Renewal when God speaks to His people, and they respond with, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" (Exodus 24:7b). We see it in Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:11-12, "And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers [of the four offices, we know that only the latter office- that of the pastor/teacher- is operative today. What therefore is the purpose of the pulpit?], for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ."

Accordingly, in Scripture the pulpit/preaching is understood to be a gift from God given to the people of God that their relationship with Christ might be deepened and enriched! Speaking of the days following the destruction of the nation and the return of God's people to Palestine, God said this:

Jeremiah 3:15, "Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding."- that is the gift nature of a godly pulpit. It is given to feed God's people on "knowledge and understanding"!

Proverbs 20:15, "There is gold, and an abundance of jewels; but the lips of knowledge are a more precious thing."

It is from passages like this that the counsel arises NOT to consider a job unless there is there a solid church with an effective pulpit. Gold and jewels/money can be found anywhere... but NOT so with the true preaching of God's word! For an exiled people of God whose life is bound up in Christ and so His word, nothing is more important- not even a promotion involving a significant increase in pay (gold and jewels)!

That is why the pulpit is so essential! God has ordained the pulpit to use it to grow, encourage, and correct His dispossessed people that they might make it to heaven!

This brings us to the significance of the closing of Ezekiel's mouth. As we have seen, though Ezekiel was called by God to be a prophet to the people of God in exile, nevertheless the prophet was not allowed to preach for the first seven years of his ministry. Describing the terms of Ezekiel's call, God said this:

Ezekiel 3:26, “Moreover, I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be dumb, and cannot be a man who rebukes them, for they are a rebellious house.”

This is an amazing statement in its own right. Unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the many other prophets, for the first seven years of Ezekiel’s ministry the prophet’s mouth would be closed! This means he wasn’t allowed to preach! As a prophet he would be called to do bizarre things, the people would ask him what it meant, and he could say nothing beyond what God gave him — no explanation!

Why did God close Ezekiel’s mouth? Look at the end of the text: It was because God’s people were “a rebellious house”!! That means as a punishment for their gross rebellion, God removed the pulpit. We see this stated again in chapter 12 explaining further the restriction placed on Ezekiel, God said this:

Ezekiel 12:6b, 9, 11a, “...I have set you as a sign to the house of Israel... Son of man, has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house [that is the key here], said to you, ‘What are you doing?’... Say, ‘I am a sign to you. As I have done, so it will be done to them...’”

It is very clear that the “rebellion” of God’s people was the cause for Ezekiel’s ritual dumbness. As a punishment for their recalcitrance, Israel would be bereft of that which they were trampling underfoot... the word of God!

By way of note, we see this course of action on the part of God elsewhere. If God’s people will NOT endure sound doctrine, God will take sound doctrine — His word — from them! We see this promised in Amos.

Amos 8:11-12, “Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord God, ‘When I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord. And people will stagger from sea to sea [what an image], and from the north even to the east; they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find *it*.”

A solid pulpit is a gift from the Lord! To live in an era where God’s word in the context of worship CAN be found is a blessing indeed! In contrast, listen to Psalm 74. Which records the bemoaning of God’s people right after the fall of Jerusalem:

Psalms 74:9b-10, “There is no longer any prophet, nor is there any among us who knows how long. How long, O God, will the adversary revile, *and* the enemy spurn Thy name forever?”

Again, as a judgment to the people of God who had God’s word but did not heed it, God removed the prophet/the pulpit from the land. Except in a few places (like in exile with

Ezekiel), God's people were left to stagger in the wilderness!

Now when God removes the pulpit from His people, what is He after? Why ultimately did God leave His people to stagger in the wilderness? The answer is given all the way back in Deuteronomy 8 where God's people were wandering in the wilderness.

Deuteronomy 8:3, "And He humbled you and let you be hungry [there is much more behind this than physical hunger], and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives [the idea behind this is that of thriving, flourishing, and so growing] by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord."

The removal of the preaching of God's word from His people is a judgment designed by God to produce in His people a hungering and thirsting for His word! Proverbs 29 explains this:

Proverbs 29:18a: "Where *there is* no vision, the people perish..."

Though used in business and churches alike to stress the importance of having a business/ministry plan, the text has nothing to do with vision-casting! The "vision" here is about the revelation of God and the preaching/teaching of God's word. When this is removed, God's people "perish" and so languish in their faith!

So it was amongst God's people the first seven years of Ezekiel's ministry! Lest as swine they keep trampling underfoot the word of God, the Lord kept His revelation from Ezekiel's mouth and so God's people. Now not surprisingly, this formal act of discipline would continue until the fall of Jerusalem, when God's wrath would be satisfied on account of Israel's national rebellion. Speaking of the fall of Jerusalem, God said this:

Ezekiel 24:26-27a, "...on that day he who escapes will come to you with information for *your ears*? On that day your mouth will be opened to him who escaped, and you will speak and be dumb no longer."

So a closed mouth — a dead pulpit — is a curse! On account of God's people's neglect of and rebellion against that which only could give them life — God's word- the Lord took it from them. Yet what a glory when the word of God was restored — which brings us to Ezekiel 33.

The Opening of Ezekiel's Mouth

Ezekiel 33:21-22, "Now it came about in the twelfth year of our exile, on the fifth of the tenth month [Jan. 8, 585 BC], that the refugees from Jerusalem came to me, saying, 'The city has been taken.' Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me in the evening, before the refugees came. And He opened my mouth at the time *they* came to me in the morning [this is huge... judgment was lifted!]; so my mouth was opened, and I was

no longer speechless.”

From everything we have seen, we now understand the significance of this moment in redemptive history when it came to God’s exiled people. Yes, they lost the land. Yes, they lost their homes. Yes, they lost their wealth. But they gained that which is more valuable than any of these things combined... the word of God (cf. Psalms 19:7-8)!

This no doubt is why after giving the call of being a watchman when it comes to the souls and lives of God’s people in exile, God immediately transitioned into a treatment of Ezekiel’s call to preach the word and the people’s response! This raises the pregnant question:

- As watchman, how ought we to live? What is it that should guide us when it comes to the care we offer each other?

Answer: We must live, minister, and grow “...by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4a)!

From this we see the importance of the pulpit, the men who fill it, and the people of God who receive it! And so, though they were living as aliens and strangers in a foreign land, God’s people nevertheless would count themselves wholly blessed. For they had what other generations were bereft of: the health, vigor, and satisfaction that comes from a godly pulpit!

Now lest you think that what we have before us is irrelevant to your current living, you must see that it is of utmost significance! Listen to the warning God gave in 2 Timothy.

2 Timothy 4:3-4, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.”

What an uncanny similarity to the people of God during the kingdom years! In the last days — the days in which we live — God’s people once again will NOT endure sound doctrine. They will NOT want to hear the word of God proclaimed from the pulpit. RATHER, they will want to have their ears tickled— which is the ancient expression for entertainment!

Now in the Kingdom Years, what did God do in order to discipline His people when they sported the same attitude? In accordance to Amos 8:11-12, God withheld the preached word from His people! Is that not what God is doing in our day as well?

How is it that Europe, which witnessed some of the most amazing preaching this world has ever known, today is a spiritual wasteland? How did it come to this?

How is it that modern day Turkey, Greece, Rome, and Palestine — places that witnessed the preaching of such men as Paul, Peter, Timothy, and even Jesus our Lord- are a desert when it

comes to “hearing the word of the Lord”? They had the word of God but they despised it (they took it lightly)! And so God removed the godly pulpit from these lands and “the people perished” (Proverbs 29:18a)!

Sadly, in my estimation, the same process of degradation is occurring in the US today — which should cause us to sit up, take warning, humble ourselves, and pray! Sixty-seven years ago, Tozer bemoaned the state of the pulpit:

Today we have the astonishing spectacle of millions of dollars being poured into the unholy job of providing earthly entertainment for the so-called Christians [he is not talking here about the movie industry, but churches]. Religious entertainment is in many places rapidly crowding out the serious things of God. Many churches these days have become little more than poor theaters where fifth-rate ‘producers’ [he is talking about preachers here] peddle their shoddy wares with the full approval of evangelical leaders, who can even quote a holy text in defense of their delinquency. And hardly a man dares raise his voice against it!

The great god Entertainment amuses his devotees mainly by telling them stories. The love of stories, which is a characteristic of childhood, has taken fast hold of the minds of the retarded saints of our day, so much so that many manage to make a comfortable living by spinning yarns and serving them up in various disguises to church people [he is here again talking about preachers]. What is natural and beautiful in a child, may be shocking when it persists into adulthood, and more so when it appears in the sanctuary and seeks to pass for true religion! (A.W. Tozer, 1955)

If Tozer was correct (62 years ago), what ought we to do?

- In the words of Ephesians 3:18, grieve about the appointed sacrifice!
- Pray and so “beseech the Lord of the harvest...” (Matthew 9:36-37)!
- Teach our children how to listen to a sermon!
- And vocally raise your expectation when it comes to this and every pulpit in this land...

In 1961, Pastor Floyd Doud Shafer gave this exhortation to his generation when it came to what they must do when it comes to those who are called to fill the pulpit:

Make him a minister of the Word, fling him into his office, tear the ‘office’ sign from the door and nail on the sign ‘study.’ Take him off the mailing list. Lock him up with his books and his typewriter and his Bible... Throw him into the ring to box with God until he learns how short his arms are. Engage him to wrestle with God all the night through. Let him come out only when he’s bruised and beaten into being a blessing... When at long last he dares to enter the pulpit, ask him if he has a Word from God. If he doesn’t, then dismiss him. Tell him you can read the morning paper and digest the television commentaries and think through the day’s superficial problems and manage the community’s weary drives and bless the sorted baked potatoes and green beans ad infinitum better than he can. Command him not to come back until he’s read and

reread, written and rewritten, until he can stand up, warn and forlorn, and say, 'Thus says the Lord.' (MacArthur J. F., 2005)

Brothers and sisters, if we don't demand this today from this and every pulpit, we will lose it!

Works Cited

MacArthur, D. J. (2017). *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*. Wheaton: Crossway.

MacArthur, J. F. (2005). *Preaching: How to Preach Biblically*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Tozer, A. W. (2009). *The Knowledge of the Holy*. New York: Harper One.