

PREACHING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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SECTION I: GENERAL COMMENTS AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

In Protestant churches, preaching has become the main event in the Sunday meeting. The preacher is the most important person in the church. Often, the church is identified by the preacher's name and the church is incidental, for example, "Charles Stanley's Church," or "Robert Schuller's Church." The gifted orator who can draw and inspire a crowd is the "main feature." How consistent is this with the practice of the church in the New Testament? What is the place of preaching and what is the role of the preacher?

We first must ask, "What is preaching?" There are a dozen or more terms in the New Testament that the English Bible translates, "preach." Two terms and their derivatives dominate the discussion and are the most important to the questions concerning preaching. Both sometimes are translated, "preach," but they do carry different meanings. The two words are,

Euangelidzo (εὐαγγελίζω) - to bring or announce good news

Euangelion (εὐαγγέλιον) - good news

Euangelistes (εὐαγγελιστής) - one who announces good news

Kerusso (κηρύσσω) - to announce or to proclaim anything

Kerugma (κήρυγμα) - a proclamation or an announcement

Keruks (κήρυξ) - a herald

The chief difference between the two words is that *euangelidzo* always describes good news. In the Greek world, when a battle has been won, a messenger is sent to *euangelidzo*, to bring the good news of victory (in the New Testament, there usually is the expectation that the hearer will embrace the "good news," i.e., *the Gospel*). *kerusso*, on the other hand, may or may not have good news as its content. The term communicates merely that something is proclaimed. For example, when a king traveled through a city, a *keruks* (a herald), preceded him, his job being to *kerusso* (proclaim) that the king is coming.

An interesting use of these terms is seen in the Greek athletic arena. The *euangelion*, the "good news," is the announcement of the victory. It was good news to the victor. The *kerugma* is the announcement of the arrival of the victor upon the platform of honor.

In some biblical passages, the distinction between *euangelidzo* and *kerusso* is important. For example, in I Peter 3:19-20, the term is *kerusso*.

in which also He went and made proclamation (kerusso) to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

The King James Version translated *kerusso* in this verse by the term, "preach." Because of this, some have taught that Jesus "evangelized" these souls who were lost and in perdition, thereby giving them a "second chance" after death. If the term were *euangelidzo*, (based on how the term is used throughout the New Testament) this would be solid exegesis. However, Peter did not use the term, "evangelize," but the term, "announce." Whether or not the announcement was good news or bad news depended upon the hearer's relationship to Jesus. Also, whether or not a second chance is offered after death must depend on something other than this passage. Since Peter used the term *kerusso*, rather than *euangelidzo* one cannot use this passage to develop a doctrine concerning the eternal fate or non-eternal fate of those described as "being in prison."

The two terms, *kerusso* and *euangelidzo*, are almost synonymous in Acts and the Epistles, in that they usually are describing the same activity. *Kerusso* emphasizes the proclamation, whereas, *euangelidzo* emphasizes the content of the proclamation - "good" news. This was done in the villages and streets. It was not done among the saints. Those who had accepted the good news did not need it "announced" to them again. Paul never "preached to the choir." Thus, the modern idea of a gifted orator who "preaches" every Sunday to filled pews is missing in the New Testament.

Some versions obscure this truth by using the term "preach" when another term would be more accurate. For example, Acts 20:7 describes a gathering of the local church. In the King James, the verse states,

And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.

The Greek word translated, "preach," in the KJV, is *dialegomai* (διαλέγομαι), from which we get the English term, "dialogue." Etymologically, the word means, "through talk," or "to talk through." Implied is some degree of logical or intellectual communication. In the New Testament it usually carries the idea of a lecture or a discourse (it has that meaning in Hebrews 12:5). However, it does not mean "to preach," in the sense of proclaiming.

If a man is a preacher, in the New Testament sense, then his ministry belongs outside of the believer's meeting. The New Testament preachers "evangelized" in the Temple, in the synagogue, and any other place that they could get a hearing in the presence of those who were not Christians. The activity that took place in the believer's meeting was more expository in nature, explaining spiritual matters to the saints, and encouraging them (more on this later).

In the early Church, the unsaved did not ordinarily attend church meetings, but it was a possibility, as Paul notes in I Corinthians 14:23-24:

If therefore the whole church should assemble together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all;

This is an "if" situation, but it was recognized as a possibility.

From time to time, in the modern history of the church, for one reason or another, evangelism became a dominant part of the Sunday meeting in some denominations. The idea developed that one "went to church to get saved." Christians were urged to bring friends to church, so that they could "get saved." Indeed, the Holy Spirit has used this format (especially in the various Baptist denominations, Churches of Christ, and Christian Churches, Assemblies of God and other groups where evangelism is the focus) from time to time to enlarge the Kingdom. However, it is not the New Testament model. When proclamation/evangelism is the Sunday morning format, the body-life of the local church always suffers and anemic spiritual life usually results.

Many denominations view the job of the preacher as that of getting as many people into the church building as he can on Sunday, and to get as many people "down the aisle" as he can, in every service. This mentality has so dominated some groups that regardless of the topic of the Sunday sermon, it must be turned to evangelism during the last portion of the message and an invitation offered at the close. Some have this tradition so enconced that a salvation appeal is made and an invitation offered, even if the preacher knows that every person present already is saved.

Another term worth noting is *diamarturomai* (διαμαρτύρομαι) (15 times in the N.T., 9 of these in Acts). This word carries the sense of "declaring emphatically."¹ Originally, it had the same sense as the English expression, "As God is my witness..." because it was used with the sense of calling upon the gods as witness to the truth of what was being spoken. Thus in Acts 18:5 we read,

*But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, **solemnly testifying** to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.*

On the basis of the meaning of the word, *diamarturomai*, Paul is pictured in this passage as "emphatically declaring" (preaching) to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. In addition to this instance in Acts 18:5, this term is used to describe preaching of the Gospel in Acts 2:40; 8:25; 10:42; 20:21, 24; 28:23.

Acts 18 presents an interesting picture. Paul began by "lecturing" in the synagogue (v 4 - here the word is *dialegomai* (διαλέγομαι), the same as in Acts 20:7). Then, after he became bolder, he began "preaching" (v 5). When they resisted his message, he moved his preaching location to a house next-door to the synagogue. From this location, he proclaimed the Gospel and many were saved (v8). Paul then stayed there, teaching the converts for eighteen months (v 11). This follows the pattern that Jesus gave in the Great Commission, "baptizing them... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Thus, the place of preaching (in the sense of proclaiming or evangelizing) in the New Testament Church is not in the gathering of the saints, but in gatherings of those who are lost. In the Church of the New Testament and in First Century Churches, the focus of the meeting was the Lord's Supper and prayer. Reading of Scripture and teaching took place as long as time allowed. Singing was almost non-existent.²

SECTION II: A SURVEY OF PREACHING IN ACTS

It is instructive to survey Acts, noting the content and style of the sermons recorded therein. All of the recorded sermons preached early on in Jerusalem, essentially were the same sermon; i.e., that Jesus, whom the Jews had crucified, is the resurrected Lord and King. There are five such sermons recorded.

1. Acts 2:22-36
2. Acts 3:12-26
3. Acts 4:8-12
4. Acts 5:29-32
5. Acts 5:42

During the weeks immediately following the birth of the Church, this was the appropriate message for the Jerusalem audience. The sermons were preached to those who knew exactly what had happened in the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. They also knew of the reputation of Jesus, as healer, etc. The preacher did not have to establish the truth of any facts, they were well known. The only thing that he did have to proclaim was the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. As he did this, the Holy Spirit empowered the message and many accepted it.

Not until Stephen's charge against the Jewish rulers (Acts 7) do we find a recorded sermon that does not follow this pattern.

The first sortie out of the city was that of the persecuted Jerusalem believers. The only recorded sermon of this group is that of Philip, in Samaria. We have no details of his preaching, other than that he preached Christ unto them. The Holy Spirit confirmed the word with miracles (Acts 8:5-7, 12-13).

Peter and John, who were sent down to credential this revival by the impartation of the Holy Spirit, spent some time in Samaria. No record of their sermons is given, other than that they "solemnly witnessed" (*diamarturomai* - "emphatically declared," as noted above) and "evangelized" in many villages of Samaria (Acts 8:25).

Philip meanwhile was sent by the Holy Spirit to rendezvous with an Ethiopian official (Acts 8:26-40). Philip heard the man reading Isaiah 53, as he rode along in his chariot. At the Ethiopian's invitation, Philip expounded this passage and gave him the good news concerning Jesus (*v* 35 - *euangelidzo*, translated, "preached" in most versions, carries the idea of "good news," more than "proclamation).

The next preaching recorded is that of Saul of Tarsus, after his conversion. In Acts 9:20-22, Paul is described as preaching (proclaiming) to the Jews living in Damascus. His proclamation was filled with power and he proved that Jesus, whom he and the Jerusalem Jews had been opposing, was the very Christ.

In Acts 9:29, during his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion, Paul is described as speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. The Greek text says that he "both spoke and discussed with the Greeks" (Greek speaking Jews) the Divinity of Jesus. The term, "discussed," (*sudzeteo* - συζητέω) can also mean "to argue."

Acts 10:34-43 records the summary of the sermon that Peter preached to a group of Roman citizens who were practicing the Jewish religion. They were familiar with all of the facts concerning the Life of Christ. Peter did not need to do more than to remind them. The thing that he added was the fact of the resurrection and Jesus' sovereign choice of who should be witnesses of that resurrection. Even as God sovereignly intervened to bring Saul of Tarsus to the faith, so a heavenly intervention occurred with this group. The Holy Spirit fell upon them in the midst of the sermon.

Acts 11:19-21 records the spread of the church into the region north of Israel. Although these Greek speaking Jewish Christians initially "spoke" (*laleo* - λαλέω - "to speak") the Word only to other Greek speaking Jews, some bold believers from Cyprus and Cyrene began to evangelize the Gentiles. The only information given concerning the content of their preaching is the statement in verse 20, "preaching the Lord Jesus." The word translated "preaching" is *euangelidzo*, meaning, "to communicate good news." The hand of the Lord was with them and they had great success.

Acts 13:5 contains the next record of preaching. Barnabas and Saul had just begun their first missionary journey. They were in the city of Salamis on Cyprus. The only statement made is that "they preached (*katangello* - καταγγέλλω - meaning "to announce") the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews." We have no details of the content of their sermons, nor any details about the results.

Acts 13:16-41 contains one of the most complete records of Paul's preaching to Jews. He began by appealing:

- to their knowledge of the Old Testament,
- their knowledge of the preaching of John the Baptist,
- and their knowledge of the events in Jerusalem.

Throughout the sermon, he referred to Old Testament passages as confirmation for what he said. He accused the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem of causing the death of Jesus. He then gave testimony to the resurrection, again appealing to Old Testament passages. Finally, he declared forgiveness of sins through Jesus and warned of dire results if they rejected the message. There is a sense of calmness in the record.

Further comments on the ministry of Paul & Barnabas in Chapter 13 are too scanty to provide any information concerning content or style.

Acts 14 contains several statements concerning the bold witness of Paul and Barnabas on this first missionary trip, but does not give any details of their preaching, other than that they "spoke boldly in the Lord" (verse 3) and that they "evangelized" (verse 7).

Acts 16, although containing the record of conversions does not reveal the content of the sermons. Paul did speak the Word of the Lord to the women (vv 13ff) and the jailor (vv 31-33) but the only detail given is that the jailor was told, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ."

Acts 17:2-3 records a summary of Paul's words to the Jews of Thessalonica. For three Sabbath days, he "lectured" out of the Scriptures. It is interesting to note that the Greek says that he "opened up" the Scriptures, which means to exegete and exposit. From this exposition, Paul alleged that Christ had to suffer and be raised from the dead. Then, he asserted the Jesus was this very Christ of whom the Scriptures spoke.

Acts 17:22-31 records the summary of Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Athens. He used the many temples of many gods in Athens as a starting place for his speech. The Athenian philosophers viewed the populace as rather foolish for worshipping at these temples. Many of them had come to the place that they considered it impossible for a God to be in a temple. Paul took off on this truth. He said that God had overlooked the superstitions of the past, but now he declared (*apangello* - ἀπαγγέλλω) that all men, everywhere should change their minds about these things. He declared the resurrection of Christ and the coming judgment.

Acts 18:4-5 describes Paul as reasoning with the Jews in the Corinthian synagogue, every Sabbath, and persuading both Jews and Greeks. When his two companions, Silas and Timothy arrived, Paul was "pressed by the Word" and then, solemnly witnessed (*diamarturomai* - as noted above, the idea is "as God is my witness, what I say is true," therefore, "emphatically declared" is a good rendering of the word) that Jesus is the Christ.

Acts 18:19-21 describes Paul's lecturing in the synagogue at Ephesus. No details are given of the content of his lectures, but the Jews asked him to tarry with them. His schedule did not allow him to do so. No record is given of the results of these lectures.

Acts 19:8-9 records Paul's return to the Ephesian synagogue and his three month ministry therein. The terms used to describe his activity are, "lecturing" (*dialegomai*) and "persuading" (*peitho* - πείθω) the things concerning the Kingdom of God.

Acts 19:9-11 records Paul's two year ministry in the school of Tyrannus, following his departure from the Ephesian synagogue. Here he also is described as "lecturing" (*dialegomai*). No information is given as to the content of his lectures, other than that it was the "Word of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Acts 24:25 records Paul's sermon before Felix and Drusilla. The only comment made of the content and style is that Paul "lectured [or discussed] concerning righteousness, self-control, and of the judgment to come."

SECTION III: COMMENTS ON PAUL'S MODEL

Paul's style of delivery catches our attention. It is noteworthy that the term most commonly used to describe Paul's presentation of the Gospel to a new Jewish audience is *dialegomai* (Acts 17:2,

17; 18:4, 19; 19:8). The term also describes Paul's ongoing lectures to both Jews and Greeks in the school of Tyrannus (19:9). It is used on one occasion to describe Paul's speaking to a group of believers (Acts 20:7, 9). As already noted, in the New Testament, the term usually carries the idea of a lecture. Kittel, states, "There is here no reference to "disputation," but to the "delivering of religious lectures or sermons."³ In certain settings, it also can mean "conversation," (as it probably does in the last half of Acts 17:17) in which both sides discuss an issue. It always conveys mental activity, probably logical presentation or logical argument. In one instance in Scripture, it clearly carries the idea of argument (Jude 9), in which Michael the Archangel, argued with Satan about the body of Moses.

Although Paul, in his early-conversion enthusiasm, may have been "pushy," (it is possible to understand Acts 9:29 as, "arguing"), the record of his later ministry presents a different picture. It seems that Paul sought, through irenic presentation, to deliver the Gospel message in a manner that would be most likely to be received. Bruce states, "It has often been observed how subtly and accurately Luke suggests the local color and atmosphere of each city with which he deals."⁴ Ramsay, in his classic volume, *St. Paul the Traveller*,⁵ states, "In Ephesus Paul taught 'in the school of Tyrannus'; in the city of Socrates [Athens - JWG] he discussed moral questions in the marketplace. How incongruous it would seem if the methods were transposed!" Paul was the forerunner of those present day missionaries who seek to contextualize the Gospel as it is taken into various cultures.

As an aside to the terminology used, the picture of Paul as a bombastic, abrasive, somewhat harsh individual, really doesn't fit the description of his style as recorded in Acts. He seems always to have sought to display respect for his hearers and to present his message in a winsome manner. Certainly, he was emotional. Only after every effort had been made to give a reasoned presentation, did he make such declarations as recorded in Acts 18:6

And when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads. I am clean. From now on I shall go to the Gentiles."

Much of today's society is repelled by the shouting, condemning, pulpit activity that is displayed in many churches. One wonders how much more effective the church would be if every preacher measured his style by Paul's model. Perhaps an answer is seen in the ministry of Robert Schuller, who although he preaches a defective gospel, seems to be received readily by most people. To a large degree, this is the result of his style, as well as his humanistic message.

I Corinthians 2:1-5 contains important information concerning Paul's preaching.

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

Socrates spoke against the practice of persuading people by oratory, without giving them true instruction, which he called, "wisdom." Paul considered neither oratorical skill nor human wisdom to be trusted as instruments of Gospel proclamation. Instead, he sought simplicity of speech and the reliance on the Holy Spirit for results. The Holy Spirit brought conviction as Paul spoke. It is clear that the power to which Paul refers to in 2:4 is not miracles, but the Holy Spirit anointed message of the crucified Christ. As Paul stated in 1:22-23, instead of attesting miracles, which the Jews sought, he relied on the power of the message of Christ, and Him crucified.

If we follow Paul's pattern, we will avoid manipulating people through acquired or inherent oratorical skills. Certain speakers are called, "great preachers," because they are so entertaining. Recently, I was urged to attend a preaching service because the speaker was so "funny." The one inviting me said that the preacher kept everyone laughing throughout the sermon. Some preachers could sell used cars, pots and pans, the doctrines of Sun Myung Moon, or the Gospel, with equal skill. The techniques are the same for them. Only the product is different. They are "salesmen," selling the Gospel. It is their technique, not the Holy Spirit, that brings them results.

The wisdom that Paul avoided was human wisdom (I Cor. 2:13). The sophists of Corinth delighted in debating which philosopher was the smartest, the wisest, the most clever. The wise and clever sayings of the philosophers were the focus of those who followed them. Whether or not the "wisdom" resulted in any practical matter in life was not important. Paul said that when he came to Corinth, he came in weakness (2:3). The power was not in his presentation, but in the power of the message and the Spirit.

In a traditional church, the Sunday sermon often becomes an end in itself. Neither the preacher nor the congregation expect the sermon to make much difference in anyone's life. "What a wonderful sermon," parishioners tell the preacher at the back door, after the service. It is as if that is what "church" is all about. Parishioners attend the morning service to hear a wonderful sermon, much as one goes to the theatre to witness a wonderful drama, then goes home to real life.

Gordon Fee makes the following comment on this passage (I Corinthians 2:1-5),

This paragraph has had an interesting history of application in the church, depending on where the emphasis has been placed. Some emphasize what Paul did *not* [emphasis is Fee's] do, that is, preach with excellence of word and wisdom; [these]... glory in a more rough-hewn presentation (which interestingly enough, is often accompanied by a kind of bombast that seems intent on persuasion of a rhetorical kind, despite protests to the contrary). Others wish to emphasize the "positive," the "proofs" of the Spirit's power, which they see as in contrast to mere preaching. On the other hand, the polished oratory sometimes heard in American pulpits, where the sermon itself seems to be the goal of what is said, makes one wonder whether the text has been heard at all. Paul's own point needs a fresh hearing. What he is rejecting is not preaching, not even persuasive preaching; rather, it is the real danger in all preaching - self-reliance. The danger always lies in letting the form and content get in the way of what should be the single concern: the gospel proclaimed through human weakness but accompanied

by the powerful work of the Spirit, so that lives are changed through a divine-human encounter. That is hard to teach in a course on homiletics, but it still stands as the true need in genuinely Christian preaching.¹

Another truth that becomes apparent from our survey of Acts is the manner in which the content of the message fit the audience. In the early months following Pentecost, all of the sermons reminded the hearers of what had happened in that city, then came the declaration of the resurrection. Those who preached this message were the men whom Jesus had chosen to be witnesses of His resurrection (Acts 1:8, 21-22, etc.). Philip's message to the Bible-reading Ethiopian was an exposition of Isaiah 53, as it was understood through the Christ. Peter's sermon in Caesarea to the Law-keeping, prayerful Romans, focused on the resurrection. Paul's sermon in Athens took the philosophers mocking of the temples and idols and declared that they were right, that there is one God who is a Spirit. In each example where there is enough of the content recorded, it is clear that the preacher brought a sermon appropriate for the audience. These were not just great speeches, they were proclamation of truth, with a hoped-for response.

Another important consideration is the term, "repent." In the passages where the preachers told the unconverted to repent, the term always is *metanoeo* (μετανοέω) which means, "to change your mind." This is the term used in Scripture for the repentance that relates to salvation. The idea is that the hearers must change their minds about who Jesus is. Two other words are sometimes translated "repent" in various versions.

Metamellomai (μεταμέλλομαι) - *to sigh, to sorrow, to grieve*. This term never is used in the New Testament to describe what happens as a part of the salvation process. In some segments of the church, for one to be saved, he must have great sorrow over sin, wailing at the mourners' bench until he has "prayed through." The New Testament does not authorize any such activity. This is the term used for Judas in Matthew 27:3. Judas mourned over what he had done, then went out and hanged himself.

Epistrepho (ἐπιστρέφω) - *to turn to, to return, to turn one's self, to turn around*. This term is used several times to describe what one does after he has "changed his mind," i.e., after he has believed. Upon believing, the convert turns from who and what he was, including his old loyalties, to God. Two times, the term is used with *metanoeo*:

Acts 3:19 "Repent (metanoeo) therefore and return (epistrepho), that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;

Acts 26:20 but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent (metanoeo) and turn to (epistrepho) God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance (metanoeo).

¹ Fee, Gordon D., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [New International Commentary on the New Testament], (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.) 1987, page 96-97

CONCLUSION: APPLICATION OF THE MODEL IN CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES

1. Where possible, the content of the sermon should fit the audience.
2. The style should show respect for the hearers
3. Historical truth, as well as theological fact, should be presented boldly and without apology
4. The preacher must view himself as a conduit through whom the Holy Spirit will speak with power
5. The preacher, even though prepared and perhaps skilled, must not have any confidence in his oratorical skills, his entertainment skills, his manipulative skills, to do the work of God
6. The first hoped for result is for the audience first to believe that Jesus is who He said that He is, that the Virgin Birth, the Crucifixion, The Resurrection, and the Ascension all are historical events.
7. The second hoped for result is that the audience will accept Jesus as Lord, and His atonement as their deliverance from the guilt and power of sin, expressing this by being immersed.
8. This is not the biblically prescribed "bill of fare" for the Sunday meeting of the Saints, although from time to time it may take place during a season of special emphasis.

¹ Kittel, Volume IV, pp 511-512

² See Garrett paper, *The Meeting*, for a discussion of what took place in a typical meeting in the Early Church.

³ Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1967) Vol. II, p. 94

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The NIC Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) pp. 329-330

⁵ W.M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1949) p.238

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