

B. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AND BIBLICAL PREACHING

To preach is primarily “to make proclamation, to herald” (κηρύσσω, *kērussō*, as a verb, Matt. 24:14; Acts 8:5; 28:31; I Cor. 1:21, 23; 2:4; II Cor. 1:19; 4:5; Gal. 2:2; I Thess. 2:9; I Tim. 3:16; or κήρυγμα, *kērugma*, as a noun, Matt. 12:41; Rom. 16:25; I Cor. 1:21; 2:4; 15:14; II Tim. 4:17; Tit. 1:3.). It is the appointed heralding of a given message in such a way that the addressed audience has no doubt that an authoritative declaration is being made. Hence, when we speak of Christian preaching we are describing that distinctive pronouncement of the Word of God (II Tim. 4:2), though more essentially the gospel it contains, according to the authority of God in Scripture and through the agency of the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:14). In more broad terms, we should also include the aspects of “evangelizing” (εὐαγγελίζω, *euangelizō*, Acts 13:32; Rom. 10:15; Heb. 4:2) and “teaching” (διδάσκω, *didaskō*, Matt. 4:23; Rom. 12:7; I Cor. 4:17; I Tim. 2:12; 4:11. Further consider the combined usage of *kērussō*, *euangelizō*, and *didaskō*; Matt. 9:35; Acts 5:25; 15:35; 28:31), all of which are frequently integral to “proclamation.” Moreover, this three-fold terminology has commonly become associated with what is technically called the skill of “homiletics,” or the principles and practice of preaching. This subject has been faithfully expounded upon in a number of helpful books.¹⁹ However our concern here takes us to a level that is so lacking in emphasis today that we seem to have more often focused upon a shell or outward form or formal methodology while neglecting the heart and essence of the matter. A. W. Tozer explains this distinction as follows:

Sound Bible exposition is an imperative *must* in the Church of the Living God. Without it no church can be a New Testament church in any strict meaning of that term. But exposition may be carried on in such a way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.²⁰

Hence the particular emphasis of this section concerns the vital importance of God centeredness in the Christian pulpit today with regard to both the message preached and the preacher.

1. Why the need of God-centeredness in the pulpit today?

Authentic God-centeredness in the pulpit vastly transcends the mere presumptive acknowledgment of God as is common in sermons every Sunday in America, and especially the presupposition that we all know Who we are talking about. It also rises far above the assumption that of course the man in the pulpit is a man of God

¹⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, 325 pp.

²⁰ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, p. 10.

because of his ordination, denominational affiliation, and degrees. Rather, the reality of a current void in this matter is indicated by means of the following signs that preaching is anemic, even if professional.

- a. The widespread pragmatic and beneficial regard of God in countless churches today might be better described as belief in God-usefulness, that is religious utilitarianism. He is at hand when needed; He is beside me in time of trouble; but He is not above me in humbling awesome majesty, sovereignty, and holiness, which perspective the contemporary professing Christian has minimal regard for. Yet the apostolic preaching of God in Acts, which book of the Bible incidentally does not contain one reference to “love,” is dominant in both the messenger and message. “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses” (Acts 2:32); “And now I [Paul] commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).
- b. The increasing paganism, multiculturalism, and religious pluralism of modern society requires that contemporary preaching should be more specific when it speaks about God, and not more accommodating or ambiguous. The gods of the larger world religions such as Mohammedanism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as multiplying sects, call for a specificity that even Israel in the Old Testament was careful to maintain. “⁸ There is no one like You among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like Yours. ⁹ All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O LORD, And they shall glorify Your name. ¹⁰ For You are great and do wondrous deeds; You alone are God” (Ps. 86:8-10; cf. 83:1-18; I Cor. 8:4-6).
- c. The present under emphasis concerning the character of God in modern preaching stands out in stark contrast when compared with certain periods of church history, including the Reformation, the Puritan era, and the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. Compare the mood of worship today, that tends to be unendingly cacophonous, sensual, horizontally relational, relaxed and amusing, with the earlier centuries when God was held in awe, quietness was desirable, and a serious attitude involved the focus of the mind. Many in churches today have never heard God-glorifying preaching that provides such a sense of His holy presence that the congregation responds with awe and reverence as did Moses and Job and Ezekiel.
- d. The shallowness of much contemporary preaching, often justified on the grounds of the communication syndrome, market orientation, or cultural relevance, has at its roots a doctrinal rather than a homiletical problem. Who God is and what He has spoken determine the mode of proclamation, not man’s assessment that concludes the times call for a new approach. This is not to deny the need for modern relevance within the bounds of reverence; yet it is a call for

a recovery of the dominant emphasis in Scripture concerning the character of God. He has not changed, His righteousness is the same, so that man cannot lay down the terms of how God may be approached. Also man has not changed, that is in terms of his unrighteous nature. Hence the only means of reconciliation is God's appointed gospel proclaimed with faithfulness.

- e. There is a failure in much formal homiletical instruction indicated by a neglect of emphasis on the inseparable relationship between knowing the character of God in an experiential sense and being His spokesman. Precise, contextual exegesis is only to be encouraged; resultant systematic theology proper is similarly to be fostered; also sermon formation, outlining, and presentation is to be taught, but if the preparation stops there, then the pulpit inherits a biblical and theological lecturer, while the souls of the people starve for the life of God, both reflected and felt.
 - f. This writer recalls that in his seminary training, there was a concerted attempt to relate his language studies in Greek and Hebrew to homiletics courses. The integrating purpose here was a wise and desirable one, except that it would have been better also to relate the theology course on the doctrine of God to those same homiletics courses. Often in seminary training, this most important relationship between preaching and the character of God is neglected, with the result being merely a smooth pulpiteer, and not a man dominated by the claims of Almighty God upon his life. ¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (II Tim. 3:16-17).
2. Biblical perspectives on God-centeredness in the pulpit.
- a. Isaiah 6:1-5.

¹ In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.' ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. ⁵ Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.'" Assuming that this passage of the Word of God describes Isaiah's call to the prophetic ministry, it is obvious that only after a soul-stirring revelation of the holiness of God is he fit to respond to the Lord's call in v. 8, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" with the reply, "Here am I, send me!" Such an encounter may be the

reason that God is more often addressed by this prophet as, “the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 10:20) than any other title. Isaiah’s appreciation of the glory of God’s holiness is more than cognitive respect; rather it is a humbling vision, a driving oracle or burden (Isa. 13:1), that constrains him to speak the Word of the LORD.

b. Acts 2:22-24.

“²² Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—²³ this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. ²⁴ But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.” After Peter has explained the phenomena of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-21), he proclaims Christ, yet always under the panoply of God the Father’s sovereign working. This Jesus of Nazareth has worked signs and wonders according to God’s enabling, v. 22. This man Jesus, with specific reference to his crucifixion, has been the object of “the predetermined plan and knowledge of God,” v. 23. This same Jesus has been raised from death to life by the power of God, v. 24. Now as Peter frequently speaks of God in his preaching here (Acts 2:30, 32, 33, 36), he obviously does not have in mind deity in general, but rather the definitive and exclusive God of Israel, who he so exalts in. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,” (I Pet. 1:3); “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (I Pet. 5:6).

c. Acts 24:14-25.

When Paul spoke before Felix and Drusilla at Caesarea, he not only explained concerning “faith in Jesus Christ,” but also “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come.” Here was ministry not only concerning salvation through belief in God the Son, but also soul-troubling accountability before God the Father, that is the only true and living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.. “But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets,” v. 14. Clearly, the fact that “Felix became frightened” indicates the truth of Paul’s later declaration that, when he came to Corinth, “my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of God, but on the power of God” (I Cor. 2:4-5). The same point is made by the Apostle when, in writing to the church at Thessalonica, he recalls his original visit to that city, namely that “our gospel did

not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (I Thess. 1:5).

d. Romans 1:1.

"Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God." Here Paul describes his calling as an apostle. He has been set apart for "the gospel of God," or "God's gospel" (cf. I Pet. 4:17). Now while this expression may describe the gospel as "belonging to God," as the gospel "about God," as the gospel "sourced in God," or as the gospel "sent by God," all of these possible aspects are grounded upon the definition of "God," and such an understanding is vital for a right appreciation of the gospel that Paul proclaims. "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (I Tim. 1:17; cf. Rom. 11:33-36).

3. Model perspectives on God-centeredness in the pulpit.

a. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones.

This writer, along with countless others who have heard Dr. Lloyd-Jones preach, has come to understand that preaching is more a divine endowment than a learned skill. This point is also true with regard to the prophets, whether a shepherd such as lowly Amos or Isaiah, the noble court preacher. Even a tape cassette cannot fully capture the spiritual dynamic of Lloyd-Jones in the pulpit expressed, not only in his sermons, but also his praying and personal presence. God was his passion and he exuded it.

(1) An estimate by Iain Murray.

Reflecting on Lloyd-Jones' Sunday night preaching, and comparing it with the message of other well-known London pulpits, an observer once said, 'Soper preaches love, Weatherhead preaches Jesus, and Lloyd-Jones preaches God.' For ML-J his emphasis was not a matter of personal preference, it was biblical. . . . This proclamation of God he saw as much more than the teaching of orthodox statements. It required the sense and experience of God both in the preacher and, if hearers were to be saved, in the pew. The presence and power of God Himself must be there.²¹

²¹ Iain Murray, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Fight of Faith*, pp. 324-25.

(2) An estimate by Dr. J. I. Packer.

I have never heard another preacher with so much of God about him. . . . His approach is habitually Isaianic: having survey man's pretensions, his fancied greatness and adequacy, moral, religious, cultural, intellectual, he punctures them, humbling man and exposing his weakness, futility and sin, in order then to exalt God as the only Savior. The thrust of Lloyd-Jones' sermons is always to show man small and God great. . . . Thus the preacher slips out of the picture and leaves us with the God whom he would have us know.²²

(3) An estimate by Dr. Lloyd-Jones himself.

What is the chief end of preaching? I like to think it is this. It is to give men and women a sense of God and His presence. As I have said already, during this last year I have been ill, and so have had the opportunity, and the privilege, of listening to others, instead of preaching myself. As I have listened in physical weakness this is the thing I have looked for and longed for and desired. I can forgive a man for a bad sermon, I can forgive the preacher almost anything if he gives me a sense of God, if he gives me something for my soul, if he gives me the sense that, though he is inadequate in himself, he is handling something which is very great and very glorious, if he gives me some dim glimpse of the majesty and the glory of God, the love of Christ my Savior, and the magnificence of the Gospel. If he does that I am his debtor, and I am profoundly grateful to him.²³

b. Dr. John Piper.

As a contemporary preacher in Minneapolis, John Piper freely admits to the massive influence of Jonathan Edwards upon his life and ministry, and this being the case, his writings take on an inevitable God-centeredness that is so refreshing in these parched and arid times. How often it is possible to visit a church today and at the end of the "worship" service sadly conclude that, "the show is now over and it is time to go home." But Piper knows how this sterile, formal religion starves the soul; only the glory of God himself feeds the soul.

²² Ibid., pp. 325-6.

²³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching*, pp. 97-8.

(1) The supremacy of God in preaching.

This book by Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, ought to be mandatory reading for any man who believes he is called to the pastoral ministry. He writes:

My burden is to plead for the supremacy of God in preaching - that the dominant note of preaching be the freedom of God's sovereign grace, the unifying theme be the zeal that God has for his own glory, the grand object of preaching be the infinite and inexhaustible being of God, and the pervasive atmosphere of preaching be the holiness of God. Then when preaching takes up the ordinary things of life - family, job, leisure, friendships; or the crises of our day—AIDS, divorce, addictions, depression, abuses, poverty, hunger, and, worst of all, unreached peoples of the world, these matters are not only taken up. They are taken all the way up into God. . . . Is this what people take away from worship nowadays - a sense of God, a note of sovereign grace, a theme of panoramic glory, the grand object of God's infinite Being? Do they enter for one hour on the week - not an excessive expectation - into an atmosphere of the holiness of God which leaves its aroma upon their lives all week long?²⁴

(2) The significance of Jonathan Edwards.

Piper expresses his indebtedness to Edwards as follows:

When I was in seminary, a wise professor told me that, in addition to the Bible, I ought to choose one great theologian and apply myself throughout life to understanding and mastering his thought - to sink at least one shaft deep into reality rather than always dabbling on the surface of things. . . . The theologian I have devoted myself to is Jonathan Edwards. I owe him more than I can ever explain. He has fed my soul with the beauty of God and holiness and heaven when every other door seemed closed to me. He has renewed my hope and my vision for ministry in some very low times. He has opened the window on the world of the Spirit time and again when all I could see were the curtains of secularism. He has shown me the possibility of mingling rigorous thought about God with warm affection for God. He embodies the truth that theology exists for doxology. He could spend whole mornings in ejaculatory prayer walking in the woods outside Northampton. He had a passion for truth and a passion for lost sinners. All of this flourished in the pastorate. Above all, Edwards had a passion for God, which is why he is so important if we are to focus on the supremacy of God in preaching.²⁵

²⁴ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, pp. 20, 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-6.

(3) The attestation of David Brainerd.

In writing to his brother John during the summer before his death, Brainerd comments:

Read Mr. Edwards on the *Affections*, where the essence and soul of religion is clearly distinguished from false affections. Value religious *joys* according to the *subject matter* of them: There are many that rejoice in their supposed *justification*; but what do these joys argue, but only that they *love themselves*? Whereas, in *true* spiritual joys the soul rejoices in God for what he is *in himself*; blesses God for his holiness, sovereignty, power, faithfulness, and all his perfections; adores God that he is what he is, that he is unchangeably possessed of infinite glory and happiness. Now when men thus rejoice in the *perfections of God*, and in the *infinite excellency of the 'way of salvation by Christ'* [Acts 16:17 and I Thess. 5:9], and in the holy *commands* of God, which are a transcript of his holy nature, *these joys are divine and spiritual.*²⁶

4. The priority of God in preaching and all things.

If the only true, triune and living God is to be at the center of Christian preaching, it is with the intent that the believing sinner may come to embrace a God-centered world view. J. I. Packer puts it this way.

What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the 'eternal life' that Jesus Gives? Knowledge of God. 'This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent' (John 17:3). What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God. 'Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me' (Jer. 9:23 f.). What, of all states God ever sees man in, gives Him most pleasure? Knowledge of Himself. 'I desire . . . the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings,' says God (Hos. 6:6).

I can forgive a man for a bad sermon, I can forgive the preacher almost anything if he gives me a sense of God, if he gives me something for my soul, if he gives me the sense that, though he is inadequate in himself, he is handling something which is very great and very glorious, if he gives me some glimpse of the majesty and the glory of God, the love of Christ my Savior, and the magnificence of the Gospel.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, "Mr. Brainerd's Remains," II, p. 439.