

Minister's Message – November 2014

Primacy of Preaching

Why do we go to church on Sundays? What do you like best about church? Is it the singing? Is it the prayer? Is it the preaching? Is it the ceremony or ritual? Is it the friends you meet? Is it the food? For many, preaching is at the bottom of the list. This may be because the preaching is poor, or may be because you are not prepared for listening and engaging the word of God as it is preached. The primacy of preaching was recovered during the Reformation but has waned in various periods since the sixteenth century, and especially today.

At a church I once attended the minister was asked to have the Lord's Supper before the sermon so the people were free to leave. A modern trend is to label singing 'worship' and for this to be the focus of church – as the singing goes longer the sermon gets shorter. The sermon is sometimes referred to as a homily or meditation. I recently heard a preacher in a large evangelical church say we come to church for fellowship. He was exhorting his congregation to engage in fellowship with no mention of the preaching.

Even ministers can let preaching take a back seat in their ministry – especially when only a handful of people come to listen. In some places the minister becomes occupied in running schools or 'op shops'. One church had to drag their minister away from the church school and put him back in the pulpit. For many ministers it is the liturgy and the sacraments that take precedence over preaching.

What about church members? What priority do you give to the preaching of the word of God? Does it come before or after your duty to run youth club, Bible study or visit the nursing home? Certainly we are to use our God given gifts in ministry but this must not come ahead of listening to the word preached. The Reformers would rebuke any who thought they could minister to others while absenting themselves from the public worship and especially the sermon. They would not have accepted anyone saying, 'I read my Bible at home' or 'I listen to a tape'.

In the New Testament church the new believers 'continued steadfastly in the apostle's teaching/doctrine and the fellowship' (Acts 2:42). Teaching comes first, not fellowship. The teaching was that of the apostles, which is what we now have in the Bible. Preaching is the exposition or explaining of the Bible. It involves bringing out the meaning or sense of what is read, helping you to understand (Nehemiah 8:8). Preaching of the word is done in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit when he stood up to preach at Pentecost.

When the apostles were called to 'serve on tables' they said it was not good for them to leave the task of preaching (Acts 6:2). Paul's final instruction to the young Timothy was, 'Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season; rebuke, correct, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching' (II Timothy 4:2). Paul assumed the church would be assembled listening to Timothy preach the word.

Public worship is just that – public. The Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God includes: the public reading of the Holy Scriptures, public prayer before the sermon, preaching of the word, and prayer after the sermon – and 'let a psalm be sung'. Scripture reading and the sermon are central.

Preaching is a sacred and solemn task. The preacher prayerfully prepares, prayerfully preaches the word and prays that it will accomplish what God pleases (Isaiah 55:11). Special grace accompanies the preaching of the word, just as in the sacraments. Do not expect the preacher to entertain – that is not his task. Rather, expect to be fed on the riches of the word of God. The preacher is there to feed you spiritually that you may grow in knowledge and grace, and be equipped to serve God in whatever ministry you have been given.

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