

Preachers and Preaching—An Overview

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Introduction

In ages past God called men to preach His Word by immediate and/or supernatural means. He apparently thus enlisted and inspired all the Old Testament prophets (Exo. 3:10–4:17; Jer. 1:4–10; Eze. 2:1–7; Hos. 1:1; Jon. 1:1–2; et al.). The Lord chose and charged the twelve with their preaching duties directly and immediately, if not supernaturally. The call of Saul of Tarsus was both immediate and supernatural (Acts 26:13–20).

God no longer thus calls or commissions men to serve Him as spokesmen. Nor does He inspire them, notwithstanding the claims of some. He still calls men to serve Him as Gospel preachers, according to their abilities and inclinations, but through His Word (Mat. 25:14–30; 1 Cor. 4:1–2; 2 Cor. 4:7; 5:10; Gal. 6:5–10; 1 Pet. 1:17; et al.). Men have the same responsibility and accountability to use their God-given and personally cultivated abilities as did those who were called and endowed by supernatural means.

The Rewards of Preaching

A man who is dedicated through-and-through to God and His Word will not find a more rewarding life's work than preaching the Gospel. I speak not of monetary rewards, for the Lord knows (as do most who have preached very long) that many congregations still expect maximum labor for minimum pay. To be fair, brethren have grown considerably in their remuneration of preachers over the past fifty years. However, some brethren who demand generous pay and benefits for their own labors still refuse to employ the "Golden Rule" toward the preacher and his family.

The only preachers I know of who are reaping great financial rewards from preaching are those who have sold their souls to preach an emasculated message to liberal and apostate congregations. I know of cases where such men are being rewarded for preaching soul-damning error with annual salaries of \$100,000 and more. I am neither advocating that preachers should aspire to such salaries, nor that such salaries are innately wrong. However, something is more than just a bit skewed here when false prophets are rewarded with a king's ransom for preaching sweet nothings and appeasing sectarians while faithful men by the hundreds struggle financially from month-to-month to continue to have the marvelous privilege of preaching the Truth.

The great reward for faithfully preaching the Word is in seeing the power of the Gospel in the hearts of sinners who hear, believe, and obey it to their salvation. Additionally, it is found in seeing those babes – and older saints as well – grow and mature and make their calling and election sure. The reward is in knowing that there will be souls in Heaven who would not be there but for his work. Of course, there is that great and final reward that will be his on top of all the other returns.

The Principal Stumbling Block of Preachers

With all that one might say about the privileges, rewards, and satisfactions of preaching, it is fraught with some peculiar risks and temptations. All Christians face temptations, but some of these risks are intensified by the very nature of the work of preaching – and they remain somewhat constant. Perhaps paramount among them is the danger of succumbing to pride, arrogance, egotism, and self-importance.

When God called Jeremiah, he hesitated. He sought to excuse himself for want of speaking skills and because he was a “child” (Jer. 1:7; cf. Exo.3:10–4:12). Some would condemn Jeremiah’s hesitancy and excuse-making. Rather than criticizing him for his reticence, however, should we not praise him for his humility and modesty? He was not so much trying to avoid doing what God commanded as he was wondering aloud how, knowing his own limitations, he would ever be able to accomplish it.

Hardly any character trait so becomes the human personality as humility. This fact is especially so in preachers. Self-centered, ego-maniac preachers existed in the first century, of whom Paul wrote – they “...preach Christ even of envy and strife” (Phi. 1:15). Lamentably, such men are not extinct. Pride is a temptation of special severity to preachers because they are constantly in the public eye. People often ask them questions, seek their counsel, and praise them. A preacher can begin to believe all those nice things people may write or say about him. (Of course, his wife and some of the brethren may help him keep in touch with reality!)

Few things are more disgusting to right-thinking people than a preacher who is puffed up with his own ability, education, influence, or importance. I am convinced that pride is what has led some to abandon the Truth and adopt theological pluralism. I am also convinced that some have adopted (and continue to propagate) strange, quirky heresies to feed a bloated ego. Then there are brethren who have attained advanced degrees (many of whom are on the faculties of “our” schools) and who look down their “ivory-tower” noses at those “uneducated”

("unscholarly," in their view) fellows who have no more sense than to devote their lives to studying and preaching the Bible. Such self-proclaimed "scholars" are among the leaders in the determined effort to corrupt the New Testament church. In their pride they cannot stand for their denominational academic peers to accuse them of being "narrow" in their concepts of fellowship, the conditions of pardon, worship, and like subjects. No one of whom I am aware is critical or jealous of true scholarship or scholars, but any man who has learned so much that he thinks he can improve upon God's Divine pattern or forsake it at will is not a scholar in any Biblical sense, regardless of how many degrees he may have earned.

One does not have to be a doctrinal fruitcake, a theological liberal, or someone educated beyond his intelligence to fall prey to pride, however. Sticklers for doctrinal Truth can also succumb to this deadly poison. Some seem not content to let the "cream rise to the top." The immature allow ambition to drive them as they openly seek position and prominence that have come to others only through decades of faithful and sacrificial work. I know a man of outstanding native ability and intellect who once preached the Gospel. He had an almost unbounded ambition that could not stand to be bested, even in a table game. Whenever corrected, he had some excuse or rationalization. He played up to those through whom he hoped to gain some advantage, while treating with rudeness and/or condescension those he considered to be his inferiors (especially children and women, including his wife). He craved attention and made himself obnoxious in seeking it. He knew all the answers. He went out of his way to impress people (in pulpit and classroom and on a personal level) with his superior knowledge. He was pushy, selfish, and impudent, frequently touting his own talents. He especially sought the favor of women. He eventually destroyed his home, his reputation, and the great work he could have done as a Gospel preacher. There is no chance he would ever recognize himself in the above description – he is far too vain and has too much hubris to do so. Solomon's advice in Proverbs 27:2 is especially valuable for all who preach: "Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; A stranger, and not thine own lips."

A few years ago, some fellow preachers told me that a preacher attending a major brotherhood lectureship was asking, "How do you get an invitation to speak on one of these lectureships?" He apparently wanted to speak on one very badly and perhaps equated doing so with "arriving" as a preacher. As a director of such a lectureship for several years, I occasionally received offers from men who recommended themselves to me and volunteered their services as speakers. I always thanked them politely – and never invited them. Such brethren remind me

of a twelve-year old fledgling song leader who tries to lead “The New Song” every time he gets up or of a new convert wanting to begin a study of John’s Revelation while still wet from the baptistery water.

They may not have a string of degrees after their names, be well-known, or be the greatest orators. But those who preach God’s Truth in humility and at great sacrifice because they would rather die than compromise it are nonetheless great in the eyes of God, though all men may hate them.

Conclusion

While the Lord did not address the following words exclusively to preachers, they are words that all who preach the Gospel should take to heart: “And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled; and whosoever shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Mat. 23:12). Jeremiah was just such a humble man. The proud man asks, when charged with great responsibility, “Why have you waited so long to call?” The humble servant, such as Jeremiah, asks, “How can one of such mean ability possibly be equal to the task?” No cloak ever looked better on a Gospel preacher than the cloak of humility. Let us all, especially those of us who preach the Gospel, cultivate the beautiful and commendable trait advocated in Romans 12:3:

For I say, through the grace that was given me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but so to think as to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to each man a measure of faith.

An unknown poet could have had Jeremiah in mind in the following verse:

How ready is the man to go,
Whom God hath never sent!
How timorous, diffident, and slow,
God’s chosen instrument!