

Genesis 1:26-28

COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

Vol. II, No. 2

© Ray Sutton, 1988

February, 1988

COVENANTAL PREACHING: THE REAL GREATNESS OF GREAT PREACHING

by Ray Sutton

The Bible says very little about **how** to preach. It doesn't say **how** Peter stood, how he held his hands, how he held his gaze; it just says that he **raised** his voice. Does this mean he yelled, or that he only cleared his throat and spoke up enough to get the attention of everyone? I don't know, and neither does anyone else, which is a good thing.

Can you imagine what the preaching of the Church would be like if the Bible told us the precise styles of its preachers? Reminds me of my seminary days when my buddies and I tried to copy every great preacher on the faculty. There was the professor/preacher who held his mouth at a slant, and kind of talked to one side. I attempted unsuccessfully to imitate him. But I just couldn't do it because I would get horrible face cramps for weeks after trying this secret method of spell-binding an audience. Interestingly, I learned later in my seminary career that he had been in a car wreck and had had extensive facial surgery. I had visions of students lining up at the plastic surgeon's office to have their faces fixed to preach like this great preacher.

Then there was the other great communicator on campus. He had a funny way of slowly running his finger under (not in) his nose and turning it out toward the audience, all in the same motion. Don't ask me how it worked, but for some unknown reason, all of us students thought it had something to do with his ability to capture an audience. It was a stunning move, but I couldn't do it. I would get my finger caught in my nose. Besides, every time I tried this style, my wife would crack up, because she knew who I was imitating.

Get the point? We usually imitate those things that are often the negative idiosyncrasies of people because they are the distinctives that stand out, but which are annoyances. If the Bible told us about the various styles of preaching, what we carnally think makes great preaching great, we would have two millennia of itching and twitching in our church history books, and not the sermons themselves. God in His wisdom, however, has given us the sermons instead of the preachers' squirms. Alright, He has also given us a little audience description and response, and He uses some different words to distinguish how preaching was done in Jerusalem from the preaching that occurred in Greece. But that's about it. The Holy Scriptures simply provide the text, and even the sermon texts are probably not **complete**. They are normally shortened summaries, or else, Biblical preaching is a lot shorter than we normally practice, which is a real possibility.

So preachers have struggled for two thousands years to figure out how to do **Grrrrrrreat** preaching, in the words of Tony the Tiger that old star of the Kellogg's

commercial advertising *Frosted Flakes* cereal, my favorite by which to watch Saturday cartoons (not **now** mind you, but when I was a kid). Yes, preachers have studied the Greek rhetoricians to learn their canons of rhetoric. They have studied theatre. They have analyzed and examined just about everyone who has been able to command the attention of large audiences.

But as of yet, no one has discovered what makes great preaching great. As of yet there is not a *Julliard School of Preaching*, where master preachers sit and apprentice as homileticsians. And I don't seriously believe that there ever will be, because the real factor that distinguishes great preaching from bad is not quite so tangible. Don't get me wrong. I detest boring preaching as much as you, but when we come to the Bible we don't find the kind of preaching information that we often look for.

This lack of information about what **we** think is so important, therefore, is not necessary for great preaching. The Scriptures don't get into style, diction, elocution, and all of the other "gyastrocutions" which preachers and their audiences tend to think are what makes the difference. The Bible is silent on these matters, even though they may have their place for discussion and study. It doesn't emphasize homiletical method, and we must be careful not to direct too much undue attention to it.

So let's not focus our attention on the mechanics of preaching. Let's consider the **what before the that**, as Van Til used to say in regard to apologetics. He argued that a description of **Who** God is should come before a discussion of **whether God exists**. His apologetic is primarily a defense of **Who not that**. Or, we could say that he defends the **that** by properly presenting the **what**. How? All men inescapably believe in God, for God has been revealed to them (Romans 1:18ff.) They have to affirm Him to deny Him. If they say they don't believe He exists, it's not because they don't believe but because they make-believe in **another** god. The real issue in defending the faith is therefore "Who is God?", and for this reason Van Til has preempted pagan man's games, as well as the games of all the make-believe apologetical methods.

Applying the what-before-the-that principle to preaching, let's examine the **content** of the sermon primarily because that is **all** that God has left us. And, we should presume that if **the sermons themselves** are what He left us, then **they** are what is at the heart of making great preaching great.

Acts

The great sermons in the New Testament are found in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. They vary in length, but they do provide some sort of model. They are **cove-**

nantal because they are **kerygmatic** messages, meaning "to proclaim," or "to herald." A **herald** is a messenger. By definition, he brings the message of someone else, and according to the covenantal nature of messengers, he is an agent of the Suzerain of the world, the God of heaven and earth. Paul proves the point when he uses **suzerain treaty language** to describe his role as a herald. He says,

Therefore, we are **ambassadors** for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).

An "ambassador" is one sent by a king from the regal kingdom to precede and represent the monarch before another nation. He comes proclaiming a message that is not his own. He is a herald with a herald-type-of-message, a **kerygmatic** message. They are usually outlined as having four or five parts. F.F. Bruce explains four of these in relation to Peter's sermon at Pentecost. He says,

The apostolic **kerygma** regularly falls into four parts, which may be summarized thus: (1) the announcement that the age of fulfillment has arrived; (2) a rehearsal of the ministry, death and triumph of Jesus; (3) citation of OT scriptures whose fulfillment in these events prove Jesus to be the Messiah; (4) a call to repentance. These four elements are present in Peter's proclamation.¹

I would add a fifth element to these messages, especially Peter's sermon at Pentecost. I see a concluding aspect to his sermon, a special warning that coincides with the fifth section of the Book of Deuteronomy by way of a quote, "Be saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2:40; cf. Deuteronomy 32:5). By saying this, Peter acts in the same manner as Moses, who transferred the inheritance of Israel to his receptive audience. I'll come back to this when we get to the final section, but for now this brief explanation serves to point out a basic five-fold and covenantal connection between the sermons in Acts and Deuteronomy.

So what? The tie between covenant and Peter's sermon explains that Peter is God's covenantal ambassador assigned to bring a covenantal message. In short, it says that preaching is a **covenantal act** from beginning to end, and in so doing, it solves two very real and practical problems. It specifically tells us the **purpose and content** of preaching, two matters that cause preachers no small amount of agony.

Covenantal preaching, which is the essence of true preaching because there is no other kind of truly **Biblical** preaching, should be designed to lead people into the covenant and into the renewal of their covenant with God, and it should contain an explanation of the covenantal ways of God's dealing with His people: how God gives the covenant, how man breaks the covenant, how God restores the covenant, and how man is supposed to live covenantally in his personal walk, in his family, at his job, and in the world.

Viewed covenantally, preaching comes alive. It has **real** purpose; it has a **real** central place in the worship service, and it ceases to be a show or an attempt to manipulate. It has a message, and it has a message that is life-changing.

Covenantal preaching also has immense practical value for the preacher. He will find it much easier to prepare

sermons once he understands God's covenant. He will know what he is supposed to be doing and what he should be preaching, which are two issues that very few ever really comprehend; and, I know because I'm one who spends a lot of time listening to the struggles of ministers. Once a preacher knows what he is supposed to be trying to accomplish, however, the battle of sermon preparation is half over. As W. A. Criswell at First Baptist Church of Dallas once told me and some other ministers, "I spend over half of my sermon preparation time trying to figure out my statement of purpose for the sermon. Once I've done that, the rest is easy."

After the minister has defined his purposes covenantally, he will have something to say. He will know **how** to prepare sermons, something most ministers dread because they lack the methodology. Why? With a covenantal view of preaching, he will be able to use the covenant structure itself to prepare. He has a ready made five-point outline on every passage and topic imaginable. Sound too good to be true? Maybe, but look at it this way. God provides the sermons in Acts (as well as the other sermons of the Bible) to teach the Church about God's covenantal acts and purposes. He speaks so that the world might properly know how to speak back to Him. But He also speaks because He wants the Church to know how to speak to the world. If He speaks covenantally to the Church and Peter speaks covenantally to the world, doesn't it stand to reason that He wants the Church to do the same? The answer is an emphatic, "Yes."

Granted, covenantal preaching is not described in terms that will necessarily give the preacher the voice of George Whitfield, the famous and powerful preacher of the Great Awakening. It will not automatically give him the great delivery of Charles Spurgeon, the effective 19th century Baptist minister of Great Britain. It won't even teach a man how to sing and dance around on the stage like Jimmy Swaggert, if I can be so vulgar as to mention him in the same paragraph with the other two truly great preachers. But **covenantal preaching** will enable a preacher to do truly great preaching **because it is guaranteed to be life-changing**. It and it **alone** is the kind of covenantal preaching prescribed by God and practiced by His messengers, as demonstrated in Peter's sermon.

Peter's Covenantal Pentecostal Sermon

Peter's sermon at Pentecost follows the covenant and it is addressed to the covenantal community: "Men of Judea" (Acts 2:14), "Men of Israel" (2:22), "Brethren" (2:29). It has five parts that are parallel to the Deuteronomic structure.

Transcendence

But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'And it shall be in the last days,' God says, 'That I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind'. . ." (Acts 2:14-21).

As F. F. Bruce pointed out, Peter announces the age of fulfillment has come. He says, **this is that**, specifically, this is what Joel said would happen: God would become specially present through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the "Last days."² Like Moses, who spoke

1. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1954] 1971), p. 69.

2. The phrase "last days" should be understood covenantally as referring to the **last days of the Old Covenant** (Hebrews 1:2).

what God commanded him (Deuteronomy 1:3), Peter begins his sermon with a declaration that he is only relating what God has already said through the prophet Joel. In this case, he is relating a definitive **fulfillment** brought about by the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit.

Peter's declaration points to the transcendence and immanence of God at Pentecost and **in his sermon. God is distinctly present** at both events. God is transcendent at Pentecost and in the sermon in that God is really the One who has spoken through Joel and is speaking through Peter. He is also transcendent in that He was specially present when Joel spoke and He is certainly present in an even greater sense through the Holy Spirit. In the words of Jean-Jacques von Allmen, Swiss Reformed theologian of this century,

God is not so much the object as the true source of Christian preaching. Preaching is thus speech **by** God rather than speech **about** God. Certainly preaching also has for its aim to reveal God, to present Him to men; but when we preach, our role is not that of the **impresario** presenting a star to the crowd. We are not there to explain to men that God is eternal, that He knows all things and is capable of all things, that He loves us and wants us to love Him in return. We are there in order that, through our preaching, **He may say these things Himself** [emphasis mine]. In other words, revelation is not something within our personal power, it is the concern of God. That is what makes our ministry at once so awe-inspiring and so comforting: awe-inspiring because God Himself chooses to speak through our words, comforting because we do not have to invent what we are to say, we have only to listen and to pass it on. God is thus at work in our preaching (Philippians 2:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:13), so that to reject preaching is to reject God Himself (1 Thessalonians 4:8).³

Von Allmen presents us with the powerful concept that **preaching the Word of God is a means of grace**. In so doing, he is consistent with the historic Reformed view of the means of grace. He sounds the familiar theology of one of the Reformed Church's oldest confessions, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, which asks in Question 65,

Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all benefits by faith only, whence comes this faith?

And the answer is,

From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments.

The Reformed faith has always been clear on this point. It refuted the Roman Catholic notion of the transformation of the sacraments into the physical body and blood of Christ. But it also rejected a Zwinglian view of the sacraments, which maintained that they were mere symbols, and it argued for a dynamic presence (spiritual and covenantal) of Christ in the "preaching of the holy gospel" and the sacraments. Its view of the means of grace is summarized by the standard Reformed systematic theology, written by L. Berkhof,

Only the Word and the sacraments can be regarded as means of grace, that is, as objective channels which Christ has instituted in the Church, and to which He ordinarily binds Himself in the communica-

tion of grace.⁴

Since the Word and the sacraments are the means of grace, Christ is really present in both. He is not bodily present, but He is spiritually (mystically) present, the historic truly catholic (not Roman Catholic) view that was revived by Calvin and the English Reformers. But we must conclude that if Christ is really present in preaching, which is a means of grace, then He is present in the sacraments which are equally a means of grace. He is transcendently and immanently present through both aspects of worship, an insight which should change the way the congregation views both!

If God's covenant is preached covenantally, there is life-changing power even if one person is present. Why? Because Christ is really present in this kind of preaching. There is that famous story told about the conversion of William Carey, the great missionary to China. He showed up for church one day and he was the **only one there**. The minister thought about calling off the service because the attendance was so poor, but he decided that if God had given him one person, he should preach as if the room were filled. He preached his sermon and Carey was converted. As a result, China was opened up to the Gospel and by means of Carey's ministry, **thousands of lives were changed through the converting power of the real presence of the preached Christ!!**

I have spent more time on the first point of Peter's sermon than I will spend on the others because I think that it is a perspective that unlocks many insights about Biblical preaching. I am firmly convinced that the modern Church does not understand the doctrine of the Church because it does not understand the doctrine of the **means of grace**: covenantal preaching being one of those means. Nevertheless, I hasten to add that the other parts of Peter's sermon carry us into other earth-shattering concepts.

Hierarchy

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs . . . (Acts 2:22-24).

The second part of Peter's sermon is a **historical review** of the rebellion of Israel, as well as God's victory over their antagonism: "This man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death, and God raised Him up again" (Acts 2:23-24). This segment is consistent with the structure of Deuteronomy, which has the same emphases in its second section (Deuteronomy 1:5ff.).

The **redemptive-historical** flavor of Peter's sermon points to an important concept in preaching. It demonstrates how Peter handled the historical and narrative sections of the Bible by seeing history as the progressive unfolding of redemption and not as a pretext for moralizing and trivializing. It has been called the **redemptive-historical method**, consisting of three aspects.

First, redemptive-historical preaching is **historical**. It views "all history as sacred history because all history is in reality God working toward His goal."⁵ It examines the text with a view that the text is the unfolding of this great redemptive history, converging on and moving away from the redemption of the world through Christ. It does not principlize in the sense that it makes the redemptive history of the text into trivial axioms that somehow imply that

4. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1938] 1969), pp. 604-605.

5. Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura* (Toronto, Canada: Wedge Publishing, 1970), p. 122.

3. Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Preaching and the Congregation* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1962), p. 7.

the text is ahistorical. Rather it asks the question, "Where does the Biblical text which I'm supposed to preach fit into the history of redemption?" And then it preaches the redemptive message of that passage.

Second, redemptive-historical preaching views history as a unity. It believes that all of history is united around one common goal, the redemption of the world in Christ Jesus. So it asks, "What does the passage I'm supposed to preach have in **common** with all of redemptive history?"

Third, redemptive-historical preaching means **progression**. Since the Bible is the history of the **progress** of redemption, redemptive-historical preaching not only seeks to understand what the appointed text has in common with the rest of the Bible (unity), it also operates under the assumption that every Bible passage makes a unique contribution to the history of redemption (diversity). It asks, "What does the passage in question add that no other passages before it provide?"

Thus, covenantal preaching focuses on the redemptive history of Scripture. It is not afraid to be tied to the history of a book that is thousands of years old. As Von Allmen says, "Which is less damaging to the power of the Gospel: preaching which, if accepted, involves a conversion to the theological, anthropological and cosmological attitudes of Semitic thought, or preaching which abandons this requirement, and, at the same time, ceases to proclaim the historical character of the great works of God between the creation and the Parousia? Where is the true scandal of the Gospel — a scandal which must be maintained at all costs: in the existence of a God who challenges man and thus extends him to his limits, putting him in an eschatological **situation**; or the fact that this challenge can reach us today only through an eschatological **history**, whose lines are fixed for ever by precise dates and events?"⁶

Ethics

For David says of Him, "I was always beholding the Lord in My presence. . . . God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants upon his throne. . . . He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. . . . The Lord says to My Lord, sit at My right hand, until I made Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet" . . . (Acts 2:25-36).

The third section of Peter's sermon is organized around a series of Old Testament quotations. It demonstrates an **ethical cause/effect** relationship between what the Old Testament taught and Christ's obedience to it. Moreover, it shows that Peter's method was to begin with the Old Testament to develop the points of his message. Von Allmen makes a striking observation about preaching the Old Testament.

The text of God's Word which we have to translate and make present is not preserved only in the canonical documents of the New Covenant. It also includes those of the Old Covenant We cannot therefore exclude the Old Testament from Christian preaching; and this is not only out of fidelity to the

apostles who saw in their testimony a confirmation of that of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms, but also because a Church which discards the Old Testament does not achieve a true meeting with Christ. The docetic Christology [Docetics did not believe Christ took on real flesh] of Marcion is a direct consequence of his rejection of the Old Testament: **the absence of Israel prevents the incarnation.**⁷

Von Allmen's argument is that where the Old Testament is not preached and taught, the real Humanity of Christ is denied. As a consequence, the Bible is not properly applied so as to see the **cause/effect** between the Old and New Testaments, a connection that ties ethical faithfulness to ethical fulfillment.

Oath

. . . And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" . . . (Acts 2:37-39).

The fourth part of Peter's sermon calls these Old Covenant people to renew their covenant in terms of New Covenant baptism, just as Moses had called Israel in the fourth segment of the Deuteronomistic covenant to renew their covenant with the "New" covenant curses presented in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 27-31). They took an oath and repented.

First, covenantal preaching calls men to repentance. "This effect is to plunge men into crisis, to call their whole existence in question in a manner so radical that their eternal destiny will be decided by the way in which they react."⁸ For those who do there is a promise of life, and for those who don't there is a promise of death.

Second, covenantal preaching always leads to a sacramental expression. It either leads to baptism or to communion, much the same way that Israel was led to the Red Sea and away from it to the Promised Land of abundant food. As I said at the beginning, covenantal preaching is sacramental in nature, and it should always carry the church toward one or both of the Gospel sacraments. Thus, it should never be detached from Holy Communion!

Succession

And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2:40).

Peter finally turns from the covenant community to the goal of the gospel: the transformation of the whole society, by using Moses' very words in the fifth segment of his sermon. Moses commissioned Joshua, and now Peter commissions these new converts.

Covenantal preaching does not stop with personal salvation. It is **cultural** in scope and application. It applies salvation to a much broader circle than the individual: "The promise is for you and your children and to those who are far off" (Acts 2:39). Thus, the result of this great covenantal preaching was the conversion of many people and the establishment of Holy Communion and prayer.

6. Von Allmen, *Preaching and the Congregation*, p. 30.

7. Von Allmen, *Preaching and the Congregation*, p. 25. Emphasis mine.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 17.