

# Where Does God Exalt the Office of "Preacher"?

by Jon Zens

Is it possible that both Protestant and Catholic worship-styles are oblivious to New Testament patterns? Catholicism puts the sacrament on center stage and includes a homily by a priest. For the most part in Protestantism's worship services everything rallies around the sermon, which is delivered from behind a pulpit. Generally, the "office of preacher" has been elevated. Is such exaltation warranted from the Scriptures we claim to be sufficient for all faith and practice?

We claim that the New Testament documents provide God-inspired direction for the New Covenant people of God, just as the Old Testament Scriptures structured life for Israel. But where do these writings ever reveal what has traditionally come to be known as "the centrality of preaching"? Where is the "office of preacher" emphasized?

If these traditions cannot be found in the Bible, why do we get our feathers so ruffled when they are questioned? Why is questioning the inordinate focus on one person's sermon tantamount to challenging motherhood, apple pie, and even God Himself? Please consider with me the following points, and see if some light from the Lord's Word emerges to drive us to view "church" in a new light.

The "sermon" as traditionally practiced, in which a clergy person usually gives a message from behind a large, wooden object, originated from Greek, not Biblical, sources.

There is nothing revealed in God's Word about the primacy and exaltation of a specialist who issues forth a monologue Sunday after Sunday. Roughly in the period of 200 — 300 A.D. the sermon emerged as central in Christian gatherings. But the cue for this practice was taken, not from the Lord's inspired apostles, but from Greek culture. As one author noted, "The 'sermon' was the result of syncretism — the fusion of the Biblical necessity of teaching with the unbiblical Greek notion of Rhetoric. [Edwin Hatch notes] 'Such are the indications of the influence of Greek Rhetoric upon the early churches. It created the Christian sermon.'" (Kevin Craig, "Is the 'Sermon' Concept Biblical?," ST, 15:1-2, 1986, p.28; citing Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas On Christianity*, Peter Smith, 1970, p.113).

The Greek verbs used in the New Testament to portray "preaching" are found overwhelmingly in situations which are outside church meetings and evangelistic in nature (cf. Eric Wright, "Terms Used to Describe Apostolic Communication in the Book of Acts," ST, 13:2, 1984, pp.7-8).

One of the few places where "proclaim" (Greek, *kataggello*) is used in an *ekklesia* setting is in 1 Cor. 11:26, and this is accomplished by proclamation through their actions, not by one person's sermon. The Greek words used for what goes on in an assembly meeting carry with them a mutuality — pray together, instruct one another, sing with one another, exhort and comfort one another, care for one another, eat with one another, etc. "Preaching" in settings outside of Christian gatherings is more one-way in that unbelievers hear the gospel announced, although discussion and give-and-take are certainly present also.

Paul does charge Timothy to "preach the word," but it must be kept in mind that he was an itinerant "evangelist," not a resident elder. If you check out the references to Timothy in the New

Testament, you will see that he was a person on the move, not having a resident ministry in one place. If “preaching” primarily takes place outside of Christian meetings, why do we magnify the “office of preacher” within the church?

Some point to Acts 20:7-12 as an example of “the centrality of preaching,” a time when Paul spoke for a long time. But it must be noted that v.7 specifically states that the purpose of their coming together on the first day of the week was “to break bread” (fellowship) not to hear a sermon.

There were special circumstances surrounding this particular meeting, for it was the last time Paul would ever see them. I'm sure if Paul came to your assembly, you would want to prolong your time together in order to hear what he had to say. Further, the verb used here, *dialogomai*, from which we derive our English word “dialogue,” implies give-and-take with the listeners. What Paul said provided the substance of the gathering, but he did not talk non-stop for hours. There would have been discussion and audience participation. Paul was concerned about what was on the hearts of others too (cf. Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach*, pp.9,100).

In 1976 a brother asked me, “Why is preaching central in your church?” The first verse that came into my mind to defend this practice was 1 Cor.1:21, God uses “the foolishness of preaching.” But the brother pointed out that the context there was evangelism, not Christian meetings. I was perturbed at his rebuttal then, but as I reflected on this issue I came to see that he was absolutely right. God uses preaching to save Jews and Greeks who come to faith in Christ.

The Greek word for “preacher” (one who heralds a message) is used three times in the New Testament, and has evangelism in the forefront. Paul twice designates himself as a “herald” (1 Tim.2:7; 2 Tim.1:11), and connects his mission to the Gentiles and his sufferings with this function. In 2 Pet.2:5 Noah is called “a preacher of righteousness,” However, he was not preaching to the choir members, but to a doomed, unbelieving generation. Again, from the scant use of the word “preacher” in the New Testament, there is no basis to focus on this function in the midst of assembly meetings.

Indeed, the Lord has said, “How beautiful are the feet of those who announce good news” (Rom.10:15), but the context here has evangelism of Jew and Gentile in view, not believers’ gatherings. “And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom.10:14).

1 Cor.14 reveals an open kind of gathering, with no one person presiding, and with multiple participation from the body. If the traditional sermon is removed from our meeting, what is to take its place? Without the focus on one part’s contribution — the sermon — it would be possible for the saints to be built up in a gathering where they looked to Christ as the Head, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, to bring forth from the brethren what is needful.

There is nothing in 1 Cor.14, or anywhere else in the New Testament for that matter, about pews, a pulpit, a sermon, one person dominating the meeting, or an “order of service.” William Barclay (himself from the very liturgical Church of Scotland) comments on what he saw taking place in 1 Cor.14.

"[1 Cor.14] sheds a flood of light on what a Church service was like in the early Church. There was obviously a freedom and informality about it which is completely strange to our ideas.....Clearly, the early Church had no professional ministry.....There was obviously a flexibility about the order of service in the early Church which is now totally lacking. There was clearly no settled order at all.....The really notable thing about an early Church service must have been that almost everyone came feeling that he had both the privilege and obligation of contributing something to it" (The Letters to the Corinthians, Revised Edition, Westminster Press, 1977, pp.133-135).

Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary notes concerning 1 Cor.14:26:

"Verse 26 insists that the Corinthians continue to worship in highly participatory and spontaneous fashion. 'Everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.' This does not mean that every person present exercises all of the gifts, nor even that all exercise at least one in every service. But opportunity is made available for all whom the Spirit leads on any given occasion to contribute" (The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians, Zondervan, 1995, p.278).

It is acknowledged by New Testament scholarship that early church gatherings were simple, taking place for the most part in homes. James' command, "be slow to speak and quick to listen," may have such gatherings as a backdrop.

"There may be an allusion to the free and unstructured worship of early Christian assemblies" (Curtis Vaughn, James: A Study Guide, Zondervan, 1960, p.35).

"It is possible that contentious Christian babes were taking advantage of the informal style of worship in the early Christian church to produce wrangling" (James: A Primer for Christian Living, Pres.& Ref., 1974, p.69).

In light of 1 Cor.14 a big question I have is this: why is the New Testament evidence we do have concerning Christian gatherings discarded and functionally treated as irrelevant, and that for which there is no evidence — the centrality of the preacher and his sermon — elevated to assumed divine status?

Why do virtually no Western churches resemble the early churches in practice?

Why do we confess that the New Testament is a sufficient guide for the church's faith and practice, and yet meet together in ways that contradict its patterns? Are we at liberty to set aside what is revealed about gospel gatherings in order to keep intact the non-apostolic traditions that we have received? Paul said in 1 Cor.12:14 that the body is not one part but many, yet we generally gather in a way that hinges on one part and denies the contributions of all the other parts (except to put a check in the offering plate).

Over a century ago David Thomas touched on some key points in this regard:

"The Christian church in assembly, on the same occasion, might have several speakers to address them.....If this be so:

"1. Should Christian teaching be regarded as a profession? It is now: men are brought up in it, trained for it, and live by it, as architects, lawyers, doctors.....

"2. Is the Christian church justified in confining its attention to the ministry of one man?

"In most modern congregations there are some Christian men who, by natural ability, by experimental knowledge and inspiration, are far more qualified to instruct and comfort the people than their professional and stated minister. Surely official preaching has no authority, either in Scripture, reason, or experience, and it must come to an end sooner or later. Every Christian man should be a preacher. Were the half-hour allotted in church services for the sermon to be occupied by three or four Christly men.....with the capability and expression withal, it would not only be far more interesting, but more profitably spent than now" ("1 Corinthians," The Pulpit Commentary, 1898, p. 459).

In his song, "All of Us Together," Scott Wesley Brown expresses a wonderful thought that can be applied to the blessings of open Christian gatherings where there is multiple participation — "no one of us has got it all together, but all of us together got it all."

### **We must remember that human traditions are not neutral.**

Jesus taught in Mark 7:5-13 that human traditions originate from religious leaders and over time take on the force of law; they tend to multiply and take precedence over more important matters; they render the worship of God to be a vain undertaking; when they are elevated, the actual instructions of God take a back seat; when zeal is directed toward them, the commands of God will be flagrantly violated; when people are fixated on traditions handed down from the past, God's Word is made of no effect; and fixation on traditions tends to permeate all of one's existence.

One tradition can spawn a legion of activities that support it.

Think of all the religious baggage that is created by the exaltation of the clergy's sermon — myriads of books, seminars, videos, and classes on various aspects of "How to Preach"; seminaries to produce people who preach; ministerial associations for local support of those who preach; clergy conferences to encourage those who preach; denominational machinery and politics to fill empty pulpits; local church pastoral search committees; expensive church architecture that focuses on the pulpit at center stage; the manufacturing of pews, pulpits, audio and video systems and other accouterments that enable the "laity" to hear sermons; a wide gamut of specialized products, services, and perks for preachers; special days for "clergy appreciation"; numerous sources for sermon outlines for busy preachers. Such a list could go on and on.

Everything in our religion is predicated on the notion, "We must have a Sunday sermon." Yet few ever ask, "Where does God's Word reveal the need for a weekly monologue?"

How can we continue to exalt the position of "preacher" when it is just a long-standing human tradition?

Do we realize that by elevating "preaching" we have for the longest time rendered God's Word of no effect? Can we reflect on the blessings that would be ours in Christ if we practiced an "each of you" meeting where Christ as the Head would lead the brethren into edification? Why do we pursue the "centrality of preaching" for which there is no Biblical evidence, and thereby neglect, stifle, hinder, and suppress the kind of open, edifying gathering which the New Testament does reveal?

I appeal to you to consider this illustration, an illustration which could be equally applied to the evaluation of many other human traditions. If a group of new believers located in a remote area of Iraq read through the New Testament in their language, would they ever come to the conclusion that in order for their meetings to please the Lord they must exalt an "office" in which one person who stands behind a "sacred desk" (a pulpit) and delivers a sermon week after week? They wouldn't. They couldn't because such notions aren't to be found in the Scriptures.

Why, then, do we become so defensive when pulpit centrality is examined, questioned, and the emperor is found to have no Biblical clothing?

It is interesting to note that D.M. Lloyd-Jones, who wrote *Preaching & Preachers*, sensed that some traditions were hindering full church life.

"There is also this whole question of the exercise of gifts in the church..... [Some] have certain major difficulties, one of which is the so-called 'one-man ministry.' We have our views about that, but I feel the time has come for us to examine even questions such as these. It does not mean that you necessarily abandon that ministry, but it does focus attention on this: are we giving members of the church an adequate opportunity to exercise their gifts? Are our churches corresponding to the life of the New Testament church? Or is there too much concentration in the hands of ministers and clergy?.....But I still ask, "Do we manifest the freedom of the New Testament church?" In other words, this is another reason why we must come back and consider the whole doctrine of the nature of the church, and the marks of the church.....The notion of people belonging to the church in order to come to sit down and fold their arms and listen, with just two or three doing everything, is quite foreign to the New Testament....." (Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions, 1942-1977, Banner of Truth, 1989, pp.195-196).

**"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."**

Brethren, I can give testimony to the wonderful blessings of growing in the practice of meeting together around the person of Jesus Christ in simplicity. Of course it is open to abuse — Paul was correcting the Corinthians in chapter 14. It is more vulnerable when you trust the Lord to guide by the Spirit and not an "order of service." It requires commitment to people — like yourself! — who can act at times like porcupines. It involves Spirit-sensitive brothers and sisters who are active participants, not just passive receivers. Fervent love for Jesus Christ, a desire to discern and act the mind of Christ, and deep humility with openness must flow among the brethren. Taking up our cross and following Jesus is not easy, but it is the only way of true blessedness.

I believe that the exaltation of preaching, while no one could doubt that some good fruit from it has been born over the years, has blocked us from pursuing the gathering of saints in simplicity which is revealed in the New Testament.

It often keeps people in a position of spoon-fed dependency, instead of fostering their growth and maturity into works of service, and deepening their relationship with the Lord and other believers. But when we boil everything down, isn't our basic concern, "What has the Lord revealed to us in His Word in this regard?"

If we exalt that which He hasn't, aren't we going to be the worse for it? Why wouldn't we want to devote our zeal to what He has shown us in the Scriptures? Is it really beneficial for a deeply-rooted human tradition to continue its reign over church life?

The story was told of a brother in the 1800's explaining to a Lutheran scholar his understanding of the early church and their gatherings. The scholar then asked, "Yes, but can such things be practiced in these days?" The brother replied, "Have you ever tried it?"

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