

PREACHING - THE MOST IMPORTANT TASK OF THE CHURCH

What is the most important task of the church of Jesus Christ? Not the most important person, for that is Christ of course, but the church's most important task. Perhaps some of you know, others may not know. Well, it is preaching.

Those of you who did not know that preaching is the church's most important task, might have thought that it was fellowship. In many ways the church is a place where people meet, where there are a variety of activities and programs going on, and where you have friends. Of course, you know that in the worship services considerable amount of time is given to preaching. But you think it is vital that a church is first of all friendly, caring and open to the community. A place where you are made welcome and experience great fellowship. To have good preaching as well is simply seen as a bonus.

Those who have become uncertain about preaching have perhaps been to worship services where many other interesting things were done besides preaching. And the preaching did not even take up most of the time. Perhaps there was a lot of music, of the kind you like. May be some drama and skits, or a bit of puppetry. Some of it was pretty good, you thought. You may have also heard people in such services talk excitedly about their faith experiences and there seemed to be a message in it for all present. Such services were far from dull. Moreover, you may say what others have said, that when there is too much emphasis on preaching then it all gets too intellectual. And so you are not so sure any more as to what is the most important thing a church ought to be doing.

Well, all that makes it relevant to look again at the church's most important task and as we look at the message of our text then . . .

1. Preaching has to do with calling on the name of the Lord for salvation.

In verses 14 and 15 the apostle Paul is asking a number of simple questions with the aim of leading the listener to some obvious conclusions. People will sometimes use this method when they want you to see for yourself that the answer can only be one thing. After you have answered the first question, you get to hear the next question. When you have answered the second question then there's a third question. And the questions keep on coming, until finally their sequence brings you to the all-important fact they want you to know.

Now the all-important truth that the apostle Paul wanted the Christian church to know is that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved [vs.13]. But the Jews of Paul's day could not see that. They didn't think that they had to call on the Lord for salvation. They already saw themselves as the chosen ones of God. And that was true in a historical sense. They belonged to Israel, the nation God had chosen from all other nations. They were descended from Abraham. They were in covenant partnership with God. God had given them His laws, the sacrifices, the temple, and much more. They assumed, therefore, God had made them His people automatically. For centuries they had been thinking along those lines and it proved most difficult for them to believe the Lord Jesus who made it clear that salvation has always been by grace.

If you have been with the church all your life, and many of you have, then sometimes you might think you automatically belong to God like the Jews assumed they were God's people. But the only way to be right with God is when His Spirit has given you a new heart and the righteousness of Christ. And the only way to receive that is through faith in Christ, and even faith is a gift from God. Many Jews, however, were so used to thinking that they were already righteous before God that the very idea of needing the Saviour Jesus Christ to atone for them was extremely distasteful. Many Jews rebelled against a salvation that is by grace alone, and so God did what He had always planned to do. He brought the gospel to the Gentiles and saved many of them when they believed Jesus as Saviour.

However, God did not completely write off the Jews. Anyone of Israel who also called on the name of the Lord was saved as well. Christ is the only Saviour that all people need.

And so the all-important fact that Paul wanted people to know is that they had to call on the name of the Lord Jesus and be saved. But how can people come to that knowledge? A knowledge that explains who Jesus is and why it is necessary to ask Him for salvation. And what does it really mean to call on the name of the Lord

for salvation? Yes, how does anyone get to know about whatever it is you want to know? Well, you begin to dig up whatever information you can find on whatever it is that you want to know about. So how does one find out about salvation? Well, you go up to Christ and ask Him about it.

But what seems at first so straightforward becomes less straightforward when it is realised that we are inclined to save ourselves by ourselves. It's part of our sinful nature. It does not come to us naturally to realise that we can't save ourselves, that we need Jesus Christ for that.

In the first place, peoples' idea of salvation is usually not a salvation from God's judgment on your sin. People have many different ideas about salvation. Many, in fact, believe that they are fine the way they are. They don't need salvation. Others might want to be saved from poverty, or from corruption, or greed, or racism, or serious health problems, or a loveless marriage. And in the second place, whatever their idea of salvation is, people believe they can either get it themselves, or have other people help them get it. They look to other people who overcame poverty, or got over their corruption or greed or addiction to whatever. People even say it quite often. That man or that woman, were racist but no longer. Or he or she learnt a lot from the way they overcame their marriage problems. Or that person conquered their addiction. So I'll get help from them. But we're seeking a solution from other sinners who have failed themselves. Isn't it much better to seek help from someone who also faced those temptations that we human being face but was able to face them all without giving in to them? In other words, why don't we go to Jesus Christ who in His human nature successfully withstood every temptation? He, more than anyone else, has shown how to live to the glory of God! Isn't Christ the best Person to look to in making a new start?

Yes, how can you and others be made aware that your most pressing need is not first of all a change in your material or physical or emotional situation but a realisation that you're a sinner and in need of being made eternally right with God? Well, you need to hear and believe Christ and His gospel. But how is that going to happen?

Well, God made Paul put before the church a number of questions that will lead people to call on Jesus Christ for salvation. Firstly, *"How shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed?"* [NKJV]. Yes, how can sinners call on Jesus Christ when they don't even believe in Him in the first place? How can you kneel before the Saviour of sinners and pray: "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner" when you may not even know who the Lord Jesus is and are not aware that you are sinner in need of salvation?

The answer is that you and I and everyone else, do not in and of ourselves want to call on Jesus for salvation. We first need to hear about Jesus. The wrong things we may have heard about Christ have to be cleared up. The truth about Christ has to be proclaimed before you can truly know Him, and become convicted of your sin, and start believing in Him, and begin to pray for salvation.

Sadly there are many people who don't believe in Christ, as the Bible shows Him to be, for a number of reasons. Whatever these reasons are, they stop people from calling on Christ to be saved. You might be one of them. If so, then you need to hear about the Christ of God. Not a man-made christ, but the Christ who is God.

Therefore, Paul second question is: *"How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?"* The answer is - the Lord Himself has to speak to them! Fine, that also is obvious - you need to hear the Christ of God speak to you. But how is that going to happen seeing that the Lord is not physically here for He has ascended to heaven? When Jesus had come from heaven to earth then He himself went around teaching and preaching. But the Lord is back in heaven, so how is the gospel communicated now?

Well, the third question has the answer. *"How shall they hear without a preacher?"* So preachers are needed through whom Christ can speak. The gospel is spread through preaching. But who are the preachers and where do they come from? The answer to this is in the last question. *"How shall they preach unless they are sent?"* So, not just anyone can start preaching. They have to be sent. Someone has to approve of them being a preacher and give them authority to preach Christ.

How will it all happen, then, that sinners needing salvation will begin to believe in Christ and call on Him to save them? Well, in order to believe and come to Christ you need to hear Christ speak. And in order to hear the word of Christ, someone has to preach Christ's word to you. And in order for that to happen preachers need to be sent by someone.

The bottom line, therefore, is that God has intended preaching as the means for sinners to hear Christ speak and get to know Him. When you know get to know about the true Christ, you are then made to believe Him and thus you will call on Him to be saved. Preaching, therefore, is not an invention of preachers. It is not a mere custom or tradition of the church that says - we must have preachers and we'll give them the job of preaching. It's the other way round. God says - preaching is my way to get people like you to hear about Christ and call on Him. Therefore, the church must have people who have a desire to preach the Word. These men need to be taught and trained. Then, once they are suitably equipped, the church can authorise them to preach the gospel.

2. Preaching is the church's most important calling.

For a meaningful relationship to exist between God and people, between God and you, God has to make Himself known. He has to say things about Himself. He has to make Himself known. Reveal Himself. In paradise Adam and Eve had a relationship with God because God spoke to them. After the fall into sin, God again spoke to men. Had that not happened then all of us would have forever remained in the spiritual darkness of sin, caught up for good in superstitious beliefs and idolatry. The devil would have loved that. People just messing around in their problems and looking to each other for some kind of salvation. The blind leading the blind.

But God did not let that happen. He spoke again to Adam and Eve, in their now sinful state, and told them what He would do for them and how they in response were to serve God. And God continued to do that to the generations of people right up to the great Flood. Many had a saving relationship with God but in time people increasingly left God. Only Noah was left who believed in God and God saved him and his family when God punished the wicked with the Flood.

After the Flood God again came to men to speak to them. He spoke to Abraham and called him to follow God. The same with Isaac and Jacob. And later with Moses. God spoke many words to Moses. From the time of creation to Moses, God spoke directly. Those to whom God spoke directly heard His voice from heaven. Or God's Word came to them in dreams and visions. When God's people became many then God appointed prophets and He used them to speak to His people. What God said through the prophets was often written down and in time this became the Old Testament.

In the fullness of time God sent His Son Jesus into the world and spoke through Him. God made Himself most fully known through Christ. Christ was God's last and final Word. Matthew, Mark Luke and John, were each inspired to write a separate account of what Christ did and said in His earthly ministry. Christ taught the apostles and commanded them to teach all nations all what He had said. The apostles had to write all this down in letters to the churches. Most of their writings and the four gospels became the New Testament. Together the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God written. They are the Holy Scriptures. God warned that no one should add to His Word or take anything away from it.

The Scriptures, therefore, are the only Word of God and the final Word of God. It's about God, about Christ, about His church and kingdom, about His second coming, and much more. To be part of all this is to be of Christ and to be of Christ is to live in Him and through Him. It is to be forgiven of sin, to have one's guilt taken away, to receive the fullness of life in Christ. To have the Spirit of God in you, to have hope and purpose, to have Christ's righteousness, holiness and knowledge. In short, it is to have salvation.

When you realise all this, when you see it, when God opens your eyes to it, then you will find yourself calling on the name of the Lord Jesus. Then you will begin believe in God and praying to receive the fullness of this gospel. But to do that you need to hear the Word of God. And God's Word is Christ speaking.

You can now understand why God commanded His church to proclaim His Word. It is the only way you can hear Christ speaking. For example, Paul commanded Timothy, a young minister, to "*preach the Word*" [2Tim.4:2]. Paul said he was ". . .not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" [Rom.1:16].

And now you and others who know who Christ is, who believe Him to be the Son of God and the Saviour, who have called on Him to be saved, together you are the church. The church is not the leadership, the church is not the organisation, but the church is made up of people like you who belong to Christ. The church is the body of Christian believers. And to the church God has said - preach the Word. Do it all the time. At every opportunity. In season and out of season.

The church, therefore, came into being because of the Word spoken by God. And through the preaching of the Word, God continues to gather into the church all those whom He has chosen to save. But the church is not yet full. We will know that the church is full when Christ returns. He will have called and saved all the elect by then. Until that happens the church must train, equip, authorise and send preachers to preach the Word, so that people get to hear of Christ and then believe in Him and then call on Him to be saved.

But the church is not just there to preach the gospel to the lost, to those not yet saved. The church is also to preach to the already saved. That same Word of God that brings salvation to the lost must also feed existing members. The Word is sufficient to sustain you as the people of God in every way. The Word is the Christian's life-blood. You the believer cannot live without the Word. It's your daily bread. The Word of God "*... is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*" [2 Tim. 3:16,17].

The church, therefore, must see the preaching of the Word as its most important task. We need the Word to help us understand the purposes of God, to know of the power of sin and death and how Christ has broken these terrible powers. We need the Word to help us understand the sinful nature of the world and how to overcome the evil in the world in the power of Christ. We need the Word to recognise the subtle schemes of the devil and how to withstand him with the spiritual weapons Christ has given us. We need the Word to develop a Christian mind.

When you come to think of it, the church is nothing without that Word of God. The Word guides us, trains us, protects us, comforts us, encourages us, keeps us, and holds us together. The Word does all that because it is God speaking to us in Christ. From the moment you are born again by the Spirit of God and begin to have faith and then right through until death, your life is dominated, controlled and influenced by the Word of God. As a Christian, you love it, live by it, it is in your mind and heart. Even when you might stray away from God, you cannot forget His Word. Sooner or later, in one way or another, God will again speak to you through His Word and call you back to repentance and renewed obedience. The Word of God, says Hebrews 4:12 "*... is living and active. Sharper than any doubled-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*"

When you are not sufficiently familiar with the Word of God, when you have stopped feeding on that Word of God, when you have not given the Word of God the attention and time it deserves, it is then that you become unsure about the Word of God. You begin to lean more on the word of man.

There will always be false prophets and false gospels. Often these do not tell straight out lies but present a mixture of error and truth. For that reason you and I must spend time with the Word of God. If that Word has not infiltrated our life sufficiently, then we will be easy pickings for the false prophets and the false gospel.

But while we speak so much about the Word of God, then do not think of it as a mere book with lots of pages and many difficult passages. No, the Word of God is the living Word of Christ. When we hear the Word preached then we hear Christ speaking to us. It is because it is the Word of God in Christ that makes the Scriptures come alive. But the Word is alive only to those whom the Spirit moves to call on the name of the Lord to be saved. The Scriptures are a dead letter to those still dead in their trespasses and sins.

Sinners dead in sin and lost are not a problem that the church does not know how to deal with. The church wants to speak to the spiritually dead. For the Word of God has the power to bring life to the dead. Nothing and no one else has that power. Only God. Christ stood in front of Lazarus' tomb and called, "Lazarus, come out!" [Lk.11:43] and the dead man came to life and walked out of the tomb. So also does the speaking of Christ today, through the Word of God, bring spiritual life to the spiritual dead. You should know, for it has happened to you who have heard the Word, believed in Christ, and called on Him for salvation. Amen.

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