

# THE NATURE OF NEW TESTAMENT PREACHING

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New Testament preaching is a kaleidoscope of styles and formats depending on the situations and circumstances. Most of the recorded examples of preaching in the New Testament are what can be called “occasional preaching.” These sermons address specific occasions. They are contextually situational, so we must be careful to avoid extrapolating any single example into a model for all preaching today. Apostolic preaching, generally classified, was either missional or pastoral in its focus. Missional sermons focused on evangelism while pastoral messages focused on Christian living.<sup>1</sup> We find numerous examples of missional messages in the Gospels and the book of Acts but limited examples of pastoral messages given the “occasional” settings of most sermons.

The bulk of the New Testament is filled with epistles written to Christians. We should understand that these epistles represented the preaching of the New Testament leaders in the local church context. The letters were written to be heard not read by the audiences. The Greco-Roman world was largely an oral culture. Less than two out of every ten people could read and write.<sup>2</sup> The letters were carried by church leaders and preached in the churches, so they represent the largest repository of New Testament preaching that we have available today.

There are at least thirty-three Greek verbs used in the New Testament to picture the richness of biblical preaching.<sup>3</sup> The King James Version uses the verb “to preach” 136 times in the New Testament to translate a wide variety of Greek verbs. However, we can summarize these Greek verbs into four major word groups for preaching and one major word group for teaching in the New Testament. The New Testament writers use these five word groups to describe what we call preaching today giving us five characteristics of New Testament preaching.

## **1. Preaching is theological discourse.**

The first word group is represented by διαλέγομαι (dialegomai). We get our English word “dialogue” from this word. Preaching is dialogical in nature if not always in practice. Greek philosophers used this word to describe dialogue that was intended to teach students. The verb stresses organized reasoning often in the context of dispute or debate. The verb is used only thirteen times in the New Testament. However, the verb is used ten times to describe the Apostle Paul’s teaching ministry in Acts 17-24. Therefore, the verb became a technical term for Paul’s preaching ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Luke used the word five times in Acts 17-24 to describe Paul’s reasoning with his listeners in a Synagogue service (Acts 17:2,7; 18:4,19; 19:8). Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence” (Acts 17:2-3) to the synagogue audience for three consecutive Sabbaths. A typical Synagogue service had six parts: the reciting of the Shema, the Prayer, the reading of the Torah, the reading of the Prophets, the sermon and the priestly blessing. Philo said that the sermon or the discourse was the most important element of the service. Any male member of the Synagogue could read and explain the Old Testament Scriptures. The speaker expounded and applied the passage of Scripture to the lives of the people.<sup>5</sup> The verb primarily referred to the reading and the exposition of the Old Testament Scriptures and Paul’s primary topic seems to be the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8).

Three times in Acts 17-24 the word is used for reasoning in the church (Acts 19:9; 20:7,9). Paul was forced to withdraw from the Synagogue in Ephesus because of stubborn, unbelieving Jews so he moved his teaching to the lecture hall of a man with the rather descriptive nickname of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8-9). The school operated in the cooler morning and evening hours leaving it

vacant during the siesta time of the day. A textual variant of Acts 19:9 indicates that Paul taught from 11:00 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day.<sup>6</sup> Paul preached like this for two years so that all Asia heard the Word of the Lord indicating that Paul's preaching ministry trained many who took his teaching to other parts of that region. Paul was clearly reasoning extensively and deeply from the Scriptures so that many were equipped to carry out the ministry. The same deep preaching took place in the church at Troas (Acts 20:7,9) where Paul was still preaching hours later at midnight. Paul's discourse was so heavy that a young man fell to his death after succumbing to sleep.

Paul's preaching style had been heavily influenced by his training in the Rabbinic schools as a Pharisee. He was trained in a method known as "peshet" which was an exegetical style of explaining and applying the Old Testament to contemporary lives. Paul would have moved back and forth from the text of the Old Testament to current experience and from current experience to the Old Testament text while maintaining a Christological emphasis.<sup>7</sup> Pastoral preaching is an organized process of bridging the gap between the text of Scripture and contemporary life much like Paul was doing in his day.

The word can also mean to argue, contend, or dispute (Acts 24:12,25; Jude 9; Mark 9:34; Hebrews 12:5). Paul argues in the Temple and with Governor Felix. Michael the Archangel contended with the devil for the body of Moses. The disciples argued among themselves as to who was the greatest and our Heavenly Father rebukes (exhorts or contends with) us as sons. The Revised Standard Version even translates the other verses in Acts as argue which is possible if we understand that within the Synagogue service, as well as the assembly of believers, debate was possible. There was – and is – often a polemic or apologetic spirit in preaching. Sermons are persuasive speech.

## **2. Preaching is personal communication of biblical truth.**

The next word is ὁμιλέω (homileo), a relatively minor term in the New Testament. This verb is used only four times in the New Testament (Luke 24:14-15; Acts 20:11; 24:26), but it is important because we get our English words "homiletics" and "homily" from this Greek word. The noun ὁμιλία (homilia) meant a speech and was used by the early church fathers for a sermon in church. The verb means to carry on a dialogue with someone. It is a much lighter term meaning to hold a conversation.<sup>8</sup>

The verb is used to describe the conversation that the two men on the road to Emmaus were having when Jesus joined them after the resurrection (Luke 24:14-15). They were discussing the reported events about Christ's resurrection in personal conversation. Felix often called Paul to converse with him about spiritual matters although frightened by Paul's explanations about righteousness, self-control and the coming judgment (Acts 24:26). Paul (Acts 20:11) switched his emphasis from a heavy discourse to a lighter conversation after the man fell asleep and fell out of the window. After healing the young man, they all went back up to the room where they broke bread (probably a meal combined with the Lord's Supper) and talked from midnight until sunrise.

Preaching is often one on one communication, personal conversation, as well as organized discourse. Sometimes we need to vary our approach to reach people just as Paul did but the conversation must be around biblical and spiritual content for it to be preaching. This word emphasizes the importance of communication skills for preaching. Sermons should be simple, practical and relevant. Preaching the depths of God's Word does not mean being obscure and

wordy. We are not preaching to seminary professors or ministry colleagues so our words should be the words of everyday people. If we must use theological jargon, we should define it with marketplace words. “Deep preaching,” as J. Kent Edwards writes, should be clear and interesting but spiritually significant.<sup>9</sup> People should not say, after our sermons, “Wow! I never saw that in the Bible before!” They should say, “That makes perfectly good sense. I understand the passage and can see how it applies to my life.”

### **3. Preaching is persuasive evangelism.**

The third word group can be represented by εὐαγγελίζομαι (euangelizomai). This verb is used 53 times in the New Testament. Luke (Luke-Acts) uses the word twenty-five times, and Paul uses the word another twenty-one times.<sup>10</sup> Literally, the word means to bring or announce good news. It is the word used for the presentation of the gospel – the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. We get our English words “evangelist” or “evangelism” from this word. The verb is derived from ἀγγέλλω (angello) which represents another major word group for preaching including such words as ἀπαγγέλλω (apangello) and καταγγέλλω (katangello). The word group means to announce or proclaim a message.<sup>11</sup>

Apostolic preaching was Christocentric, cross dominated marketplace preaching. New Testament preachers took the message to the marketplace and announced the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. They engaged the people where they were in the language they understood with the claims of Christ. Evangelistic preaching has always held an important place in the ministry of the church. Missional preaching, in contrast to pastoral preaching, focuses on the marketplace by announcing the good news of salvation to people. Many churches today use Sunday mornings for missional preaching which can be effective as long as there is another setting reserved for pastoral preaching – preaching that edifies the believers.

This word emphasizes the foundation for our preaching because even pastoral preaching depends on the gospel as a foundation. The good news of salvation in Christ is the foundation for all Christian preaching. The Cross of Christ is the core of Christianity. All preaching should be Christ-centered. All of Christianity can be related in some way to the foundational message of salvation in Jesus Christ. We must never get far from the cross as our starting point in the faith, and we must always point to Christ as the solution to our spiritual needs. As Bryan Chapell has effectively noted, a correct understanding of every passage of Scripture begins with a “fallen condition focus (FCF).” The sermon starts with a clear FCF and points to the solution in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Exposition is Christ-centered when it discloses God’s essential nature as our Provider, Deliverer, and Sustainer whether or not Jesus is mentioned by name. ... Theocentric preaching inevitably becomes Christocentric not because a sermon simply cites the name of Jesus or draws to mind an event from his life but because the sermon demonstrates the reality of the human predicament that requires divine solution and identifies that solution.<sup>13</sup>

### **4. Preaching is authoritative proclamation.**

The fourth word group is represented by κηρύσσω (kerysso). The verb is used 61 times in the New Testament. It means to announce or proclaim and comes from the noun that means “a herald.” The idea is to proclaim or announce forcefully and authoritatively like an ancient herald

announced the news to the city.<sup>14</sup> The word is used of the proclamation of the gospel (Mark 16:15); of the proclamation of God's commands that demand obedience (Rom. 2:21); and of proclamation that demands total commitment in all areas of life both for the preacher and the listener (1 Cor. 9:27; 1 Thess. 2:9). This kind of preaching is not "wimpy" or tentative. This kind of preaching is authoritative and powerful. Therefore, the word emphasizes the delivery of our message. Preaching is to be done in a manner that proclaims the Word with all its demands for obedience and submission.

New Testament preachers understood the proclamation (*κήρυγμα*) as a set of truths to be proclaimed to this world. Paul stated that he was entrusted with the *κήρυγμα* (proclamation) according to God's commandment (Titus 1:3). Many have tried to draw a distinction between the missional proclamation (*κήρυγμα*) of Apostolic preaching and the pastoral teaching (*διδαχή*) of the early church. The proclamation and the teaching were closely intertwined so major distinctions between preaching and teaching should not be emphasized. The kerygma of Paul's preaching in the New Testament centered around six core doctrines of the early church: 1) The Messiahship of Jesus, 2) His death on the cross, 3) His resurrection to new life, 4) His exaltation as Lord, 5) His salvation of humanity from sin, and 6) His return to earth to start the new Age.<sup>15</sup> These are the core doctrines proclaimed with authority by the Apostles and taught to believers in the early church.

## 5. Preaching is informative instruction.

The final word group is represented by *διδάσκω* (*didasko*). This verb occurs 95 times in the New Testament and 38 times in the Gospels, so it is the largest single word used to describe the communication of the Christian message.<sup>16</sup> It is almost always translated "teaching" and not preaching. The word is a summary description of Jesus' preaching ministry in numerous places (Mk. 2:13; 6:6; 10:1; 12:35; 14:49; Lk. 4:15; 13:22,26; 19:47; Mt. 4:23; 9:35; 11:1 et al). Jesus was "teaching" (*διδάσκω*) in the synagogues and "proclaiming" (*κηρῶσσω*) the kingdom of God (Mt. 4:23). Jesus was teaching (*διδάσκω*) with authority (Mt. 7:29). His teaching came with power.

There are other verbs used for teaching in the New Testament such as *κατηχέω* (*katecheo*) meaning to inform or instruct; *παράδιδωμι* (*paradidomi*) meaning to hand down, pass on or transmit a tradition; and *παιδεύω* (*paideuo*) meaning to bring up, train or educate. The words for teaching emphasize the content of the Christian message. The focus of teaching is on information and comprehension. There is a body of truth – the kerygma – that needs to be understood and applied to life. The word for teaching, *διδαχή* (*didache*), is used 30 times in the New Testament and came to describe what was a core body of doctrine taught by the early church.<sup>17</sup> Teaching stresses the understanding of this body of truth, the traditions handed down to us from the Apostles in the New Testament church.

The New Testament epistles are best understood as teaching messages in an oral culture where less than twenty percent of the people could read and write. The epistles were written to be heard not seen, so they combine elements of literary style with the basic components of ancient rhetoric. There were three types of rhetoric in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day. Forensic rhetoric was used in the courts. Deliberative rhetoric was used in the public assembly. Epideictic rhetoric was used in funerals or oratorical contests. Paul had been trained in rhetoric and could use all forms of rhetoric, but his epistles demonstrate the characteristics of deliberative rhetoric – the rhetoric of the free assembly. Paul's letters give us the best glimpse into what sermons were like in the early church and can serve as a model for pastoral, not missional, sermons in the church today.<sup>18</sup>

*What is the difference between preaching and teaching?*

There has been much discussion regarding this question over the years. There have been those who tried to prove that teaching was related to believers and preaching to unbelievers but this distinction will not stand the scrutiny of the biblical record. Others have tried to maintain a distinction between teaching and preaching in the sense that teaching is only informative while preaching is persuasive but this distinction cannot be maintained either. For example, the verb διδάσκω (didasko) is linked to both καταγγέλλω (katangello) which means proclaim (Acts 4:2) and to ευαγγελίζομαι (euangelizomai) which means gospel preaching (Acts 15:35). Also, Romans 2:21 using poetic parallelism treats “teaching” (διδάσκω) and “proclaiming” (κηρύσσω) as synonyms. Furthermore, at the conclusion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 7:28-29) we are told that *he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes* (NASB).

Some have suggested that there is no distinction between preaching and teaching. However, while the words are used as synonyms many times, they are not used as synonyms far more times. I would say that there is a difference between preaching and teaching but the difference is a difference of emphasis or purpose. H. Grady Davis, one of the major writers on homiletical theory in American history, writes: “the NT recognizes no difference between preaching and teaching, so far as content is concerned. The difference is only in the form this message takes in proclamation. Preaching in the NT sense takes characteristic form, the form of official announcement, proclamation of God’s action and offer, by the mouth of a chosen human messenger.”<sup>19</sup>

I would summarize the difference this way. Teaching emphasizes “understanding” while preaching emphasizes “application.” Teaching emphasizes, “content” while preaching emphasizes “commitment.” In other words, we cannot preach without teaching, but we can teach without preaching. The difference has to do with what communication theorists call “rhetorical stance.” The purpose of the sermon determines the emphasis of the message. When the purpose is primarily to inform, and the result is understanding, it is teaching. When the purpose is primarily to persuade, and the result is commitment, it is preaching.

## SUMMARY

Preaching in the NT comes in many forms, situations, and styles. We tend to use the word “preaching” to describe the technical and official pronouncements made in our major assembly of believers or the communication of the gospel in mass evangelism. However, preaching is a very broad term biblically encompassing everything from personal conversation around the dinner table to preaching on Sunday morning in a church service. It may be a polemic against the enemy, an apologetic for truth, or communication in the form of theological debate. Whenever we discuss God’s truth even on an informal basis, we can say that we preach in the broadest sense of the term. Whenever we seek to persuade anyone of their need for salvation we are preaching whether it is in the form of mass evangelism or personal witnessing. Finally, we are preaching whenever we teach and apply the Scriptures to a body of believers gathered together in the assembly of a local church.

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- <sup>1</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe and Lloyd M. Perry, *The Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers*, Moody Press, 1984, pp.3-4.
- <sup>2</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus*, InterVarsity Press, 1998, pp.89-93.
- <sup>3</sup> Gerhard Friedrich, “khrussein,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984, 3:703.
- <sup>4</sup> D. Furst, “Think, Mean, Consider, Reckon,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, General Editor, Zondervan Publishing House, 1971, 3:820-821.
- <sup>5</sup> Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)*, A new English Version revised and edited by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar and Matthew Black, T.&T. Clark LTD, 1979, 2:447-454.
- <sup>6</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977, p.290.
- <sup>7</sup> Witherington, *Paul Quest*, p. 231, 256.
- <sup>8</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, edited by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, second edition revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer’s Fifth edition, 1958, The University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 565.
- <sup>9</sup> J. Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching: Creating Sermons That Go Beyond the Superficial*, B&H Publishing Group, 2009, pp.163-170.
- <sup>10</sup> U. Becker, “Gospel, Evangelize, Evangelist,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1971, 2:110.
- <sup>11</sup> U. Becker and D. Muller, “Proclamation, Preach, Kerygma,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1971, 3:44-48.
- <sup>12</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, Baker Academic, second edition, 2005, pp. 50-51.
- <sup>13</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, pp. 303-304.
- <sup>14</sup> C. Brown, “Proclamation,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1971, 3:48-67.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 62.
- <sup>16</sup> K. Wegenast, “Teach, Instruct, Tradition, Education, Discipline,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1971, 3:761.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:769-770.
- <sup>18</sup> Witherington, *Paul Quest*, pp. 116-117.
- <sup>19</sup> H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, Fortress Press, 1958, p.109.