

1-1-1997

What it Means to Preach the Word

Thomas Olbricht

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Olbricht, Thomas (1997) "What it Means to Preach the Word," *Leaven*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol5/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

What it Means to Preach the word



By Thomas H. Olbricht

Once upon a time when I was a neophyte preacher almost fifty years ago (not that I have ever gotten over being a neophyte preacher), I thought preaching the word consisted of laying out a topic with appropriate subpoints, then quoting scripture after scripture to clinch the point.

One of my early sermons was on baptism, as might be suspected. First, baptism is necessary for salvation. "[U]nless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Second, it is for the remission of sins. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38). Third, baptism is by immersion, since it is a burial. "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Rom 6:4). Fourth, one is added to the church upon being baptized. "And the Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Other texts also were put forth, all quoted from memory with great emphasis at the appropriate spots. The more texts I could quote, the more confident was I that I was really preaching the word. A few preachers I knew believed they had reached the zenith in preaching the word because they put together a sermon in which they interjected no comments of their own. They simply quoted scripture after scripture according to their own arrangement.

Then after a year or two I decided I should learn about preaching from the experts, so I bought a book or two on homiletics (that is, the art of preaching). The one that impressed me most, because of its thoroughness, was by John Albert Broadus (1827–1895), *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 1st ed. (1870). While Broadus thought that topical sermons were sometimes needed, and if preached should utilize scripture quotes to establish points, he suggested that genuinely preaching the word consisted of taking a text and explicating it, that is, explaining what it means for the gathered body of believers. I hadn't heard much preaching of that sort, so I didn't have a very good model. But then I remembered hearing a standard sermon on the parable of the sower, so I worked out my own sermon on the parable. The points of the sermon were taken from the text itself, that is, from the types of soil. The first point consisted of the seeds that fell on the path. I gave examples of people like that. The second soil was rocky. The third infested by thorns. But finally and fourth, some seeds fell on good ground and produced crops of varying amounts of grain. I encouraged all to open their hearts to the word and thereby become productive soils, that is, servants of the Lord. With that sermon I felt a degree of exhilaration. Not only was I focusing upon scripture, but I was developing points in the order found in the text itself. Even the order of the points was not of my own making. I

Preaching remains to me a wonder, a mystery, and a challenge.

decided then to do much “exegetical” preaching, that is, depending upon the text to determine both the ideas and order of my remarks. By doing so, like the Pharisee, I felt smug and declared, “ ‘God, I thank you that I am not like all other . . .’ (Luke 18:11) preachers who make up their own sermon outlines and neglect taking them straight from your word.”

It was then inevitable, after I had been preaching about five years (it seems to happen sooner or later to all young preachers unless they are forewarned about the dangers of preaching Christ rather than the church), that Paul’s statement to the Corinthians struck me with full force. “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). I decided that preaching in the name of Christ was not to preach a book, even if the Book of books. It was to preach a person, Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, and especially the crucified Christ. But how was I to do that? I didn’t have much model for preaching the cross from among the preachers I had heard. And a problem after you start preaching all the time is that you don’t hear other preachers much. I concluded that in delivering three sermons a week, a preacher cannot constantly tell over and over again the story of events leading to Christ’s crucifixion. Paul himself did not do that. Furthermore, it struck me that Paul obviously didn’t mean that he singularly mentioned the crucifixion alone. He declared later in the same letter, “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Cor 15:14). Even for Paul, preaching the cross is at the same time proclaiming the astounding resurrection of the one crucified. We have heard in many sermons that we are justified through the death of Christ. Paul, perhaps in contrast to us, could preach a sermon on how we are justified by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Rom 4:25).

Not having a model for preaching the cross at hand, I decided to see if Paul followed his own advice. Was, in fact, the cross a controlling factor in his letters? After all,

most of us are better at declaration than orchestration. After a close study of Paul’s letters, it occurred to me that Paul did not so much tell the story of the cross. In fact, one would be hard put to piece together an account of Christ’s death from Paul’s letters. Rather, one discovers Paul developing what for him were the practical, yet profound implications of the cross for those who embraced the faith of Jesus Christ. In Galatians, Paul declared that as the result of the cross (not, certainly, just a word about it) all his personal aspirations died, thus enabling him to take up the aspirations of God as disclosed in Christ: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Because believers find their new identity in Christ, their old identities drop away. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Preaching the cross, therefore, is preaching aimed at the death of the ethnic, economic, and gender barriers that separate believers. The result of the cross and proclaiming it, likewise, is the putting to death of sin (Gal 5:24), about which Paul can be explicit. “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. . . .” (Gal 5:19–21). Preaching the cross, for Paul, meant denouncing fractures created by power groups in the church (1 Cor 3:1–9). Preaching the cross meant encouraging people who cannot see eye to eye to nevertheless accept each other. “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Rom 15:7). Preaching the cross, for Paul, then, meant not so much telling the story of the crucifixion over and over again, but setting out the ramifications of the cross in the life of the congregation and of the individual believer. Preaching the word, then, is more than being a word merchant. It is highlighting, not so much the Scripture, but the one who himself is the very word of God. “The Word [that is, Jesus, not the Bible] became flesh and lived for a while among us” (John 1:14).

So I began to wonder whether we really ought to talk about preaching the word. Perhaps what we should preach is the action of Christ upon the cross and how that action is to be replicated in our own lives. The focus of preaching should be the action of God and Christ, and our action, not the word! But then I realized that such was an artificial separation, since words interpret the actions, both in scriptures and in my preaching. The word of God, as conceived

by the prophets, was something seen as well as heard. "The words of Amos . . . which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake" (Amos 1:1). Preaching the word, therefore, does not consist merely of setting forth our ideas and arguments, but depicting the gracious action of God. The word that we herald when preaching is therefore action plus interpretation.

That was a new insight, since previously I conceived of preaching the word as dissecting and discussing a document. Our God revealed himself as a God of action. He lives apart from the book that divulges his action. In preaching, we are to proclaim the living Lord, not a book for its own sake. What counts in the final analysis is not the book, but the life that comes from the one set forth in the book. So Jesus himself declared, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39, 40).

So what advice do I have about preaching the word? First, we as proclaimers can never be preachers of the word without being constantly compelled by the love of Christ revealed in his death. "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died" (2 Cor 5:14). When God really wanted to make himself known, he did not send a Scripture, but a Son. "No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18). What we are is the word, as well as what we say. The sensitive proclaimer constantly raises the question as to his worthiness to preach the word. It is a compelling question we must face constantly. But we never are worthy of so high a responsibility on our own. We are only worthy because of his worthiness: "[H]e gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Second, we must become disciples and students of the God (Father, Son, and Spirit) who reveals himself through his word. We must stand constantly and prayerfully before the Scriptures. This we must do, not because we proclaim so much the words of the Scriptures, but because we pro-

claim the one who shines through the Scriptures and his Word.

Third, I think preaching the word can take many forms. Despite what I at one time concluded, I believe topical preaching is also preaching the word. It, of course, must draw upon the Scripture and its sense. The way the topics unfold need not come from the Scriptures, but the points of view and reflections must profoundly express the ways of God and humankind as declared in the Scriptures. One manner of doing this is topical preaching; another is expository or exegetical preaching. Preaching the word means not only that we quote Scripture, but that we also show how it applies to the life of the congregation and the lives of the believers. The writers of the New Testament on occasion quoted the Scriptures. Sometimes for long stretches they did not. For Christians the Word of God is ultimately our Lord Jesus Christ. Preaching the word means that we preach him. We also preach the church, which is his body. The church is that body that results because of the body of Christ on the cross. But we cannot preach the church with clarity without first preaching the Lord of the church who in himself is the very word of God.

As I said, I am still a novice preacher, even though there have been stretches when I have preached regularly and other long spans during which I preached only occasionally. Preaching remains to me a wonder, a mystery, and a challenge. It still calls forth my best effort even to attain anywhere near the goal of preaching the Word. In the final analysis, when the word is ultimately embraced, it is not our effort but his. "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing the soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:12, 13).

THOMAS H. OLBRICHT recently retired as Chairperson of the Religion Division, Pepperdine University and now resides in South Berwick, Maine.