

J. KYLE PAISLEY MEMORIAL FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Lord's Day Morning Sermon Notes

16th October 2005

Read: Nehemiah 8: 1-12

The Preaching of the Word in Worship

One of the most dangerous features of the *Contemporary 'Christian' Worship* programme, engulfing so many churches that claim to be evangelical, is that it leads more and more to a de-emphasis of the place of preaching in the worship of God. With the introduction of various measures and methods into the worship service the time available for preaching is continually diminished until in the last few minutes there is the delivery of the *epilogue* as it is termed. In an increasing capacity there is also the introduction of what is called "Christian Drama" with a cast of actors staging a so-called sacred play with the result that preaching is totally non-existent. It is very evident, therefore, that the advocates of the contemporary style of worship no longer believe in the primacy of preaching in the worship of God. Indeed, it is obvious that some believe that preaching is not part of Christian worship at all, that at best it is a mere appendix that is to be dispensed with as quickly as possible.

Last week I mentioned the definition that the Reformers gave of worship that is offered in spirit and in truth or from the heart: *it is comprised of Biblical & understandable words, whether said in prayer and preaching or sung in praise, presented upon the mediation & merit of Christ to the Triune God of our salvation, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.* This definition of worship is one that is drawn from the Scriptures themselves. The Scriptures must define for us what worship actually is; and the Scriptures reveal that in the genuine worship of God, words – not drama, not mere music – are the means by which the worship of our hearts is offered up to the Lord.

Moreover, Scripture reveals that the dominant place in the worship of God through Scriptural & understandable words should be given to preaching. In Scripture there are many proofs of the dominance of preaching in the worship of the Lord; and this is especially seen in the New Testament. The N.T. era brought the abolition of the ceremonial age, replacing the more intricate Levitical system of worship with the simple & straightforward Apostolic practice of worship in which preaching predominates.

One of the most obvious proofs of the dominance of preaching in the N.T. Church lies in the very words that are employed by the writers of the N.T. with respect to themselves and their preaching ministry. For example, one particular verb is 51 times translated *to preach*; and it literally signifies "to proclaim as a herald." In relation to this role of being a herald, Paul twice uses the noun form of this word when he speaks of the ministry to which the Lord had called him. 1 Tim 2: 7 – "*whereunto I am ordained a preacher.*" 2 Tim 1: 11 – "*whereunto I am appointed a preacher.*" He uses the word that means "herald" stating that he had been ordained & appointed to the role of being a herald of the message of the Gospel.

In N.T. times the "herald" was quite an important person, his office having some significant features that enable us to see and understand the vital role of preaching in the worship of God. A *court herald* was not a negotiator. Rather, he was sent with a message which he was to deliver without fear or favour, keeping strictly to his commission. In using this word to describe both the preacher & the preaching the N.T. underlines that the preacher is appointed to deliver God's message in Biblical language with clarity & authority. Therefore, N.T. worship is not to be comprised of innovations and new methods suitable to a given time or the carnal tastes of men. N.T. worship is to revolve around the method that God Himself established and from which there should be no deviation, namely – the *preaching* of the word.

In the light of these facts & features of N.T. Christianity it is very evident that the reason for the diminishing role of the preaching Scriptures is that there is a very low view of Scripture itself. That decline of which Paul warned Timothy is very prevalent today – "*The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine,*" 2 Tim 4: 3. Paul utters this warning against the backdrop of the great exhortation in v.2 – "*Preach the word.*" Here is this word already mentioned – the word *herald*. Timothy as a Gospel minister was to herald forth God's word fearlessly & faithfully in face of the low view of Scripture that was going to engulf the Church. Remember that Timothy was a Gospel minister; therefore, a man responsible for leading the Lord's people in Gospel worship, and the preaching of the word was to be central.

To bring home to your hearts the indispensable need & urgency to have the word & the preaching of it central to our worship of God, I wish to turn you to this passage in Nehemiah 8 in which the details of a worship service of long ago are recorded. Let us note some of the details that emphasise this principle that the preaching of the word is to have a central role in the worship of God.

I. *FIRST, NOTE SOME DETAILS ABOUT THE PROMINENCE OF THE PREACHING IN THEIR WORSHIP*

The preaching of the word had a place of great prominence in the worship as is seen in various ways.

1. **In their assembling.** See v.1 - there was a gathering, an assembling for this worship.

(a) It was spontaneous. V.1 says, "*All the people gathered themselves together.*" Language shows that this was a spontaneous gathering of the people. No compulsion, no coercion -- they came together in a voluntary fashion for public worship, leaving all else aside. When one is in tune with God it will be natural to come together with others for worship and fellowship. How sad that such eagerness to assemble is missing among too many. Need for prayer that the Spirit will generate such spontaneity, Zech. 8:20-23.

(b) It was unanimous. Again v.1, they assembled "*as one man.*" In such a vast throng great variety would have existed. Yet they gathered as one man -- i.e., their differences did not hinder their unity of mind. Note v.2 – on this

day was the feast of trumpets, Lev 23: 24. Would have been the two silver trumpets made for calling the people together, Num. 10: 2. Silver in Scripture signifies redemption & redemption is accomplished by Christ's obedience to the law in life & death. Thus, the sounding of the trumpets was typical of the preaching of the Gospel which calls true believers to gather together *as one man* because of their union with Christ.

2. **In their appetite**. That is, they had a spiritual appetite demonstrated in a two-fold manner.

(a) **It was shown by their desire** -- v.1, "*and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law.*" They had a tremendous desire to hear the Word of God. The people calling on the preacher to preach to them, v.13 -- came for more. Test yourself -- is your desire for the Word of God greater than for other things, Job 23: 12.

(b) **It was shown by their discernment**. They requested that Ezra would come and preach to them. See Ezra 7: 6,10 -- they called for a man to preach to them who would not water down the truth. V.6 shows that he was a man of Scriptural knowledge; v.10 shows that he himself was a man who was prepared for worship, and that he was a man who lived what he taught to the people. He was a *doer* of the word before being a teacher of it, Acts 1: 1. Hence, these people did not have *itching ears*, 2 Tim. 4: 3, 4. They came with an appetite for sound preaching of the word.

3. **In their attentiveness** -- v.3b. Attentive hearers are those who have prepared their hearts beforehand. Attention should be given in the hearing of the word, due to its authority, v.1, "*the book of the law...which the Lord had commanded to Israel.*" Being God's authoritative Word, a proper attention should be given.

Note - in this congregation there were all age groups: men, women and children, v.2; Deut.31: 12. So the little ones who had some ability to understand were present in the congregation. This is important. (a) **It is the father's duty to have his wife and children assembled for worship**. In v.3 note the words "*from the morning.*" Margin says, "From the light..." i.e., the dawn. All were gathered punctually, indicating that there was discipline in the homes and families. (b) **Children should be taught to be hearers of the word**. Note from v.3 that these little ones gave attention to six hours of preaching! Children are taught to give attention in public worship by being trained in private worship to be quiet and attentive; then in the church nursery, leading to the public congregation.

4. **In their attitude** -- there are two aspects to their attitude concerning this worship. (a) **Their reverence** -- v.5, "*when he opened it all the people stood up.*" They did not worship the Scriptures, but they revered the Author of the Word. (b) **Their order** -- v.7b, "*and the people stood in their place.*" Because of the multitude, there were various men assisting Ezra, v.7a. But where the people were located, they remained in an orderly fashion.

II. NOTICE ALSO THE POWER OF THE PREACHING IN THEIR WORSHIP

The passage shows that they felt the power of the word due of course to the manner in which it was preached. The nature of the proclamation of the Word is shown in v.8. There were three elements involved in it.

(a) **The clarification of the Word** -- "*they read in the book of the law distinctly.*" The word "distinctly" also means *plainly*, Ezra 4: 18. These returned captives had been speaking the language of the captivity. But the law was written in Hebrew, so there had to be a clarification of it. That actually means that there would have been a translating of it into the language that they had been using. But in being translated it did not cease to be the word of God. (b) **The exposition of the word** -- "*they gave the sense.*" (c) **The application of the Word** -- "*they caused the people to understand.*" Result - the word was with power seen in the two-fold reaction on the part of the people.

1. **Their mourning**, v.9 -- note how the reference is specifically to the law as that which caused their mourning.

(a) **The law produces a sense of sin**, 2 Kings 22: 8-11; Rom.3: 20; 7: 7. These verses show why it is so essential to apply the law to the consciences of sinners. The law does not save, but the Holy Spirit uses it to produce conviction of sin, which is preparatory to repentance from sin and faith in Christ, Gal 3: 23, 24.

(b) **The law produces a sorrow for sin**, the people wept under the hearing of the law, Judges 2: 4,5. There is of course a sorrow over sin that does not lead to true repentance. Many men in Scripture exhibited a seeming sorrow because of their wrongdoing, but it was not real repentance, 2 Cor 7: 9-11.

2. **Their mirth**, v.12 - the verse refers to their "*great mirth because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.*" Note how precisely it is declared that their mirth was caused by the word being understood. The word for mirth also means joy, gladness, and rejoicing. So the word brought this joy to their hearts. But what exactly was that mirth or joy? See the final words of v.10 -- "*for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*" Note this reference to *the joy of the Lord*. The expression means that the believer is to rejoice in who the Lord is and what He has done for His people. So the *joy of the Lord* is the joy of salvation in the Lord. This was the mirth that these people had. It was not some superficial frivolity but a genuine rejoicing in what the Lord does for the soul. When the word is being truly expounded, this will be the result. Such joy does two things:

(a) **It strengthens the believer**. The text declares that the "*joy of the Lord is your strength.*" The word for "strength" also means *stronghold*. The believer, who has understood the word, has grasped the meaning of all that he has in Christ and rejoices in that, in the sense that it becomes the stronghold of his life and soul. He strongly lives for Christ and serves Him, because he has got a hold of the teaching of the Scriptures on salvation.

(b) **It stirs the believer**, v.12b -- the people ate and drank, but they did something more; they sent *portions*. See v. 10a -- there were some who had nothing by way of food or drink, so these rejoicing Jews sent to meet their need. Spiritually speaking, the point being made is that the joyful Christian will want to share that which has thrilled his heart. Understand the gospel, and you will not only rejoice over it yourself, but you will want others to partake of it also. The word for *portion* means, "part." See Psalms 16:5, "*The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance.*" Christ is our salvation. See all that you have in Him and share it with those who are empty and needy.