

THE IMPORTANCE OF THEOLOGY FOR PREACHING

A Paper

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Introduction

The weight of theological emphasis upon the shoulders of the contemporary preacher has been removed by the doctrinal ignorance of the American society due in part to the widespread influence of postmodernism and its foremost component, relativism. However, the environment in which the preacher exists ought not to be the only deciding factor which characterizes the operation of his office. In light of the many different pastoral models, the preaching office remains central to its execution. Thus, the pastor must care for this main aspect of his calling in order to rightly function in a biblical manner as a shepherd and overseer of God's flock.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyze and discuss the role of theology in the preaching ministry of a pastor in order to demonstrate the necessity and relevance of doctrinal and theological teaching and proclamation as the fulfillment of the biblical office. This paper will address this issue in two main ways. First, the paper will reflect upon the universal accountability of Christians to God's revelation. Second, the paper will discuss the relationship between theology and the preacher's sermon.

Accountable to the Revelation of God

Essentially, the plight of man is doomed without the gracious gift of God's self-revelation. The absence of special revelation would signify that mankind in his sinfulness and damnation is utterly God-forsaken (Rom 6:23). However, this scenario is

not the case by any means whatsoever. To the contrary, God has spoken in volumes beyond the general revelation manifested in all of his creation (Rom 1:19-20). Just as the author of the book of Hebrews proclaimed, God spoke to his people through prophets, priests, kings, poets, angels, and finally and perfectly in his Son, Jesus Christ, who was the revelation of God incarnate (Heb1:1; Jn 1:1, 14; Eph 4:11-12). Therefore, mankind is responsible for hearing, expressing faith in, studying, understanding, defending, and proclaiming the doctrine and truth of God revealed in Scripture (Rom 10:17; 2 Tim 2:15, 3:16-17, 4:2; 1 Pet 3:15).

In the book of Job, one may notice a certain underlying theme in addition to the suffering of God's servant in the midst of unmerited evil.¹ This theme is the Christian's great necessity of and accountability to right theology concerning the revelation of God. From the outset of Job, the author as well as God declared Job as a righteous man (Job 1:1, 8). However, the optimistic and peaceful tone of the book drastically shifted when Job became the object of horrendous circumstances. For this particular study, the point to be made resides in the parallel between the two assertions of Job's righteous character in Job 1:22 and 2:10 and the two charges from God towards Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar concerning their unwise counsel in Job 42:7-8.

With respect to the first set of authorial assertions in Job's prologue, both 1:22 and 2:10 were the pronouncements of Job's religious integrity in response to his previous

¹This statement is not meant to indicate that as a sinner Job was worthy of God's grace. All sinners are condemned outside of God's grace in the gift of salvation (Rom 3:23, 5:12, 6:23, 8:1). Here, Job's righteousness and troubles are in contrast to the principle of retribution which defines that every good work is rewarded with prosperity (not limited to monetary gain) and every evil circumstance is a direct result of a particular sin.

statements regarding his humble submission to the plight he received from God.² In 1:21 and 2:10, Job welcomed both good and evil from the hand of God. In fact, in response to his wife's comment in 2:10, Job labeled her hopeless response as foolishness. Therefore, behind both acknowledgments of God's sovereignty over favorable and unfavorable situations in life, the author judged Job's theological declarations as true which led him to remain righteous in the midst of his tremendous suffering and anguish. Here, Job's right theology and representation of God's character produced holy affections and good works in his reactions to the sudden change of his peaceful and prosperous life.

In contrast to the statements in Job's prologue, the author recorded two other statements in the epilogue of this story which stood in juxtaposition to the initial understanding of the ways of God which Job submitted in the opening two chapters of the book. In Job 42:7-8, God charged the three friends of not rightly speaking of him. In addition, God asserted their theology as "folly" in 42:8 which drew a direct parallel to Job's earlier reaction to the temptation of his wife to curse God. Although God began his answer to Job with the statement, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? (Job 38:2)", his accusations against the three friends must be derived from the whole of their theology which they posited as truth in comparison to Job who seemed to be genuinely searching for a just explanation.³ In attempting to defend God, their representation of God was false and in turn served as an indirect temptation for Job to wrongly view God followed by incorrect worship of God in his dreadful situation. Their

²C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 89.

³John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. Robert L. Hubbard Jr (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1988), 539.

bad theology, presented as unquestionably true, had the potential of producing unacceptable behavior in Job. Furthermore, God solidified this point in asserting his anger against the three friends and in assigning to them the need to ask Job to offer sacrifices on their behalf. Under their theological exhortations, in order to rectify his situation, Job would have had to repent of sin with personal gain in mind. Instead, Job chose not to exchange his suffering for peace and prosperity at the expense of adopting enticing theology which at its core was incorrect.

Thus, an obvious observation from Job's sinless replies in Job 1:22 and 2:10 in contrast to God's charge against the three friends in 42:7-8 is that speaking wrongly of God is sin. Furthermore, the result of their false theology was that God required them to ask Job to offer up an extremely expensive sacrifice on their behalf.⁴ Moreover, God's acceptance of Job's sacrifice allowed their sins to be atoned for and forgiven. The example of the three friends' false counsel implied that mankind was responsible for rightly understanding and teaching concerning the revelation of God. Hence, the importance of carefully articulated doctrine is necessary and determinant for the faith and life of Christians as well as God's reputation on the earth. Therefore, mankind is responsible for "rightly speaking" of God which occurs through theological propositions and doctrinal categories and teachings based upon the whole of Scripture, namely God's special revelation. Christians betray God by recklessly believing and promoting false theology which leaves a distorted view of God for the world to behold. As noted above, this failure is a grave sin and worthy of immediate repentance.

⁴Harley, *The Book of Job*, 539.

Theology and the Sermon

As far as a particular discipline of ministry goes, preaching most obviously implies the need for theology, namely good theology. Interestingly enough, of all the qualifications of an elder in 1 Timothy 3:2-6 and Titus 1:5-9, the only aspect which does not refer to the minister's character or religious integrity is the requirement of his ability to teach.⁵ Therefore, the basic biblical model for an elder entails accountability to theology based upon Scripture. Theology's relationship with the sermon encompasses three main areas: the source, the content, and the goal of preaching.

First, Scripture ought to be the basis for every sermon. Biblical preaching must be the primary method of today's pastors. In Mark Dever's book, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, he proposed that the foremost concern of churches ought to be expositional preaching. According to Dever, this concept is by far the most important mark of a healthy church.⁶ Dever submits, "We're not called to preach merely moral exhortations or history lessons or social commentaries We are called to preach the Word of God to the church of God and to everyone in His creation."⁷ If the pastor's main calling is faithfulness to God's Word, then sound doctrine and theology are unavoidable characteristics of his ministry. Paul exhorted Timothy in 2 Tim 4:2 to, "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching." In *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, John MacArthur suggests, "Being

⁵Paul's admonishment in Titus 1:9 did not permit elders to have the ability to teach without any theological education: "He must hold to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and to rebuke those who contradict it." Titus 1:9, ESV translation of the Bible.

⁶Mark Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 25.

⁷Ibid., 38.

nourished in the Word, by preserving it purely, the man of God is first and foremost a guardian of the treasure of the truth he is to proclaim. He must preserve it from any error or misrepresentation.”⁸ A pastor is not capable of recognizing false theology or doctrine when he has not been fully acquainted with the appearance of biblical truth. The preacher’s ability to teach and refute doctrines implies much more than simple charisma in the pulpit or well-honed public speaking skills. He must be impregnated with the Word of God and familiar with the doctrines of the Bible. The pastor must not be relegated to an armchair theologian, but instead ought to immerse himself in deep Bible study equipping himself with a scholar’s mind and a shepherd’s heart. This personal commitment would then overflow into the comprising and the delivering of his sermons. John Piper exhorts pastors in this area when he says, “I say that good preaching is ‘saturated with Scripture’ and not ‘based on Scripture’ because Scripture is more (not less) than the basis for good preaching. Good preaching does not sit on Scripture like a basis and say other things. It oozes Scripture.”⁹

Therefore, one may conclude that the pastoral office must count the task of preaching as of foremost importance. The preaching office is not true preaching without Scripture as the source of its ministry. This entails the necessity and relevance of theology for its operation because the preacher must communicate Scripture through theological propositions, constructs, and categories that ultimately distinguish biblical truth from other well-defined matters of false doctrine and various religious models.

⁸John MacArthur, Jr. and the Master's Seminary Faculty, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), 100.

⁹John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 88.

Second, the content of a preacher's sermon should clearly articulate orthodox theology which proceeds from the Bible. In this approach, God's Word functions as the primary root of authority, inspiration, and instruction. Sermons which emanate from Scripture ought to contain ample theology and doctrine that is necessary and relevant to every Christian's salvation and sanctification. According to Jesus, man's livelihood depends upon how he applies the Word of God.¹⁰ In Charles H. Spurgeon's classic work, *Lectures to My Students*, he counsels preachers stating, "Sermons should have real teaching in them, and their doctrine should be solid, substantial, and abundant. We do not enter the pulpit to talk for talk's sake; we have instructions to convey important to the last degree, and we cannot afford to utter pretty nothings."¹¹

Spurgeon's warning must not go unacknowledged. The contemporary preacher ought to avoid substituting current trends and issues for biblical preaching and weighty theology. In Joe H. Cothen's guidebook for pastors, *Equipped for Good Work*, he encourages preachers in this area saying, "The servant of God must be very sure of his personal beliefs about God Unless he is sure that the Bible is God's inspired word he may soon yield to the pressures and fads of the times and begin to preach 'thus saith my opinion' rather than 'thus saith the Lord.'"¹² In addition, Jesus taught in his high-priestly prayer that God's Word, not worldly wisdom or man's opinion, is what the Heavenly

¹⁰Matthew 4:4, "But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (ESV)

¹¹Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Complete and Unabridged* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 70.

¹²Joe H. Cothen, *Equipped for Good Work: A Guide for Pastors*, rev. ed. (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co, 2002), 11-2.

Father uses to sanctify all believers.¹³ Therefore, if God's spoken revelation is the means by which people not only are saved, but also sanctified, how can theological explanations and exhortations of the Scriptures be dismissed as the primary content of sermons?

Failure to grapple with the biblical text for the benefit of the personal life of the preacher as well as the spiritual health of his congregation will create an atmosphere of deception and confusion within the church. Piper alarms preachers that, "The end result is that our Bible reading will become insipid, we will turn to fascinating 'secondary literature,' our sermons will be the lame work of 'second-handers,' and the people will go hungry."¹⁴

The value of doctrines such as inerrancy of Scripture, justification by faith alone, penal-substitutionary atonement, original sin, and the Trinity are indispensable to the saving and persevering faith of Christians. Therefore, a sermon must function as a conduit in which the preacher imparts this information and instruction to God's people and to the world of blinded unbelievers.

Third, the biblical goal of preaching is the glory of God. The overall aim of a pastor is to point fallen mankind back to their Creator and God. This idea is the case due to the fact that God created mankind to worship and adore him.¹⁵ Because of the fall, sin marred that original purpose intended for God's creatures. Therefore, the pastor's foremost initiative through the interpretation and admonishment of Scripture is to

¹³John 17:17, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."(ESV)

¹⁴John Piper, *Brothers, We are not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 74.

¹⁵In Isaiah 43:6-7, God explicitly identified his creative purpose for mankind declaring, "I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, *whom I created for my glory*, whom I formed and made." (Emphasis added by Author, ESV)

encourage and guide Christians on how to live in a manner that glorifies God (1 Corinthians 10:31). In his short work entitled, *Whatever Happened to Worship?*, A. W. Tozer supports this insight exclaiming, “Yes, worship of the loving God is man’s whole reason for existence. That is why we are born and why we were created and that is why we have been recreated That is also why there is a church. The Christian church exists to worship God first of all.”¹⁶ This type of information concerning mankind’s existence is an example of a theological proposition produced from the interpretation of God’s special revelation. Without making sense of what God has revealed to his people through the Scriptures, sinful man is not able to understand that his meaning and purpose in life is to glorify God.

The aim of the preacher’s sermons ought to involve messages which educate and direct the Christian’s heart and mind towards seeking to glorify God with his or her whole being (Psalm 35:9; Rom 12:1). James W. Cox writes in his book, *Preaching*, “The gospel we preach is the proclamation of God’s saving activity for us human beings. It tells of a God to be loved, obeyed, and worshipped, and it calls forth such responses as a rightful claim.”¹⁷ According to this statement, the message of the Bible centers on bringing glory to God. Therefore, if based upon Scripture as his main text, the preacher’s sermons ought to be in alignment with the same theme of God’s own self-revelation set forth in the biblical canon. Concerning spiritual leadership in general, Henry and Richard Blackaby argue that, “Spiritual leaders seek to bring God glory. They strive to honor God

¹⁶A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?*, comp. Gerald B. Smith (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1985), 56.

¹⁷James W. Cox, *Preaching: A Comprehensive Approach to the Design and Delivery of Sermons* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 89.

through their personal lives as well as by the conduct of their businesses.”¹⁸ This concept implies that if the goal of mankind is to glorify God, then how much more so ought a preacher immerse himself into a comprehensive and thorough knowledge of biblical, systematic, and historical theology in order to properly lead Christians into right relationships with their Creator? In her challenging and indicting book, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, Marva J. Dawn asserts, “Preaching with God as the subject immerses us in God’s sovereign Lordship, and the realization of that rule offers the genuine hope for which our society so desperately yearns.”¹⁹ Hence, the goal of preaching is heralding the revelation of God to his people so that they may respond in worship, faith, love, and good works. This purpose cannot be accomplished without the appropriation of right theology administered through sound teaching.

Conclusion

As noted in the “Introduction”, the purpose of this paper is to analyze and discuss the role of theology in the preaching ministry of a pastor in order to demonstrate the necessity and relevance of doctrinal and theological teaching and proclamation as the fulfillment of the biblical office. Before encountering the relationship between theology and the preaching office, the concept of universal accountability to Bible-based theology needed to be established. This fact led to addressing a more specific ministerial calling and its responsibility to the revelation of God, namely the sermonic aspect of a pastor’s office. Both the everyday Christian and minister are obligated to develop sound theology,

¹⁸Henry and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 142.

¹⁹Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1995), 208.

and apply it appropriately to their lifestyles.

The need for substantial theology in the pulpit is constantly growing. A theological void has characterized many evangelical churches in the past decades. In his book, *Breakout Churches*, Thom S. Rainer, a specialist in Christian research, noted that, “. . . our most recent data indicate that as many as 1 in 5 evangelicals believes there are ways to heaven outside Jesus.”²⁰ The absence of theology from congregants signals more about the source of their convictions than simply their ignorance and disbelief. The result of such a lack of prioritizing knowledge of God and interpretation of Scripture must be attributed to the lack of importance theology carries for church leaders, especially pastors.

David F. Wells proposes that the movement towards “modernized evangelicalism” is to blame for the marginalization of theology. In his famous indictment of the contemporary evangelicalism, *No Place for Truth*, Wells posits, “This transition has entailed banishing theology from its place in the center of evangelical life and relegating it to the periphery. Behind this banishment is a greatly diminished sense of truth.”²¹ When man himself becomes the primary concern of his existence, theology and sound doctrines are no longer understood as non-negotiable essentials of Christian faith. This is an obvious inference due to the fact that the supreme subject and object of biblical theology is God, not man. Thus, without a keen awareness of theology, biblical truth becomes clouded and unrecognizable.

²⁰Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 73.

²¹David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1993), 136.

In conclusion, the Christian and the preacher must submit to sound theology wrought by the constant familiarization of God's Word. As seen in the case of Job, the Christian in general is accountable for rightly speaking of God under the banner of truth. False representation of God is sin and worthy of full repentance.²² This concept draws implications for the believer as well as for the pastor and his main office of preaching. This ministerial office is not to be taken lightly or irresponsibly. In the New Testament, James warns teachers stating, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. (James 3:1)" Another text which exhorts ministers to pay careful attention to theology is 2 Tim 2:15 which says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, *rightly handling the word of truth.*"²³ Theology is the means by which preachers communicate cultivated ideas about God taken from the Scriptures and applied as doctrinal teaching that produces fruit in the likeness of saving and persevering faith which may not be found anywhere else.

²²Psalm 19:14 says, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." In Ps 19:14, David conveys through this statement the possibility of "words of my mouth" and "meditation of my heart" not comprising of content that is pleasing to the Lord. Here is another biblical instance where sound theology is equated with acceptable faithful obedience unto God.

²³Emphasis added by Author.

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