



**Christian Preaching: An Introduction (1)**

**Preaching and Preaching the Bible**

Christian preaching as a practice finds its roots in the Old Testament preaching of priests and prophets and the New Testament preaching of the apostles centred in the preaching activity of Jesus Christ.

In the Scriptures and in Christian history it is a practice that has taken many forms.

### **What is Preaching Today?**

#### **Activity:**

Spend the time to think about and to write down your own definition of 'preaching'. Do this before you look at those others.

#### **Input:**

There are many definitions of Christian preaching.

'Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers'.

Haddon Robinson, *Expository Preaching: Principles & Practice*, Rev ed. (Nottingham: IVP, 2001), p. 21.

'Discovering the word of the Lord from the Bible, for this group of people, at this particular time, and then delivering that word in the power of the Spirit, in ways that people can understand, so that they can respond in worship and service'

Peter K. Stevenson, *Preaching: SCM Studyguide* (SCM Press: London, 2017), p. 19.

For new preachers I would recommend the book by Robinson as a starting place.

#### **Activity:**

Compare and contrast these two definitions. Write down the features that BOTH emphasise and then the features that are distinct to each. Are there 'features' of preaching that you feel are missing?

#### **Input:**

Drawing upon both of these, the following are certainly important features of preaching:

- Preaching has the Scriptures as source for sermon content (expository preaching is preaching which seeks to unpack the meaning of a biblical text – this can take many forms.)
- It requires good exegetical work (expository preaching is preaching which seeks to unpack the meaning of a specific passage – in contrast to topical or thematic.)
- The person and personality of the preacher is important ('truth mediated through personality')
- The activity of the Holy Spirit is crucial at all stages
- The meaning of the text has to be applied to listeners
- There is a particular message for particular people (context)
- Good clear communication is necessary
- It should be related to worship and behavioural goals.

### **The Bible and Christian Preaching**

The content of Christian preaching derived from the Christian Scriptures the Bible.

While some preaching will range across the whole bible exploring a 'theme' e.g. forgiveness, or a doctrine e.g. the Trinity, and some preaching will seek to address a 'topic' e.g. 'leadership principles' the focus here is on preaching from a particular passage of Scripture seeking as it were the Lord's specific concern in this passage for this people today. This can be called 'expository' or 'text in context' preaching.

#### **Activity:**

Read Mark 2:1-12.

When you read this, there are perhaps many themes that might suggest themselves to you. One would be 'forgiveness' – can you identify others – write them down.

When you read this, there may be ‘topics’ you would want to preach on e.g. what does blasphemy mean in contemporary culture?’ Can you think of other topics – write them down.

**Input:**

While there are many interesting themes and topics suggested in this passage, if you were going to preach this passage as textual preaching, your primary concern would not be a general sermon on ‘forgiveness’ or ‘blasphemy’. Rather, your concern would be to understand why what Jesus said about the ‘forgiveness of sins’ was important here during a healing miracle which created controversy about his authority.

**When you come to examine a Scripture passage for preaching you are trying to answer two main question:**

1. What it meant?

At a very simple level you want to ask, what is happening, what is going on, what is being said, what does this ‘mean’ in context.

This, however, is actually a multi-layered task and will require you to ask:

- a) Is this an Old Testament or a New Testament Scripture and what difference does that make to my understanding and application of it?
- b) What type of Biblical literature is this e.g. Narrative, Prophecy, Wisdom, Psalm, Epistle, Poetry, Parable and what difference does this make to how I should understand it?
- c) What are the meanings of any words, ideas, practices, or concepts I do not understand?
- d) What was the significance of this event in its own original historical context (for a narrative text)?
- e) To what extent does where this particular passage appears in the Bible as a whole, and in this particular book of the Bible, make a difference (the chronological development of events can be very important in a narrative, and teaching in one part of an Epistle may have to be understood in the light of what has been said earlier, later, or elsewhere).
- f) What would this have meant to the first readers of this part of Scripture when they saw it, heard it, or read it?
- g) What impact do you think that this passage may have had on the first people, to see, hear, read, this story, i.e. What do you think it would do to them (encourage, challenge, convict, convince, persuade etc.)?

Of course, it is quite right you study a passage on your own, prayerfully and thoughtfully trying to understand the passage. The above questions, however, will require you to give some attention to ‘bible commentaries’ that explain texts in context. I would recommend that you should always at least look at two or three good bible commentaries to help you. If you are new

to preaching ask a minister, friend, or leader you trust to give you advice or perhaps to give you a loan of these. This work of studying a biblical text is sometimes called 'exegesis'.

Having prayerfully and thoughtfully tried to 'get at' what this passage meant in its context you are ready to try and answer the second question:

**Activity:** try and answer some of these questions (a-f) as appropriate with reference to Mark 2:1-12 to see how this enlarges your understanding of this passage. Do not worry if you cannot answer them all, rather make a note to get one or two commentaries to help you answer those you remain unclear on.

## 2. What it means?

Here your concern is to try and find the areas of contact between the content and context of your Scripture passage and the context and situation into which you are going to be delivering the message.

This means that you will have to pay attention to the life and nature of society at large. It will also mean paying attention to the life and nature of the Christian congregation in this society to whom you will be speaking.

Interpreting society is not easy and just as with the Scriptures we should avoid easy generalizations and speak both with the compassion as well as the judgement of God when we seek to understand it.

In interpreting a congregation knowing something about their history, general demographics in terms of age, and their current situation may help you decide what points of contact in the passage may be of most value to this group.

This task of interpreting the social context and congregation as well as the Scripture text in its context (Question 1) is important if you wish to not simply inform people about what a passage means but to apply it into their situation but requires both care and thought.

**Activity:** Imagine that you have been asked to speak at a small Baptist Church with mainly elderly people. What points of connection would you try and make between Mark 2:1-12 and their likely human and congregational setting.

In your study seeking to understand what Scripture meant and means will provide you with the content from which you will create your sermon although other factors which we will consider in later sessions will also impact what you include and do not include, how you include the material, and how you actually deliver it.

***Please note: These notes were prepared by Dr. Stuart Blythe Associate Professor in the John Gladstone Chair of Preaching and Worship, Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, for the SBLPA. These are for the personal use of SBLPA members and should not be reproduced or distributed without permission.***