

2 Timothy 3:16-4:5

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; (17) so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (4:1) I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: (2) preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. (3) For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, (4) and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

Why Is God's Word so Prominent in Corporate Worship?

In our series on worship, which will come to an end in two more weeks, we need to ask this question: Why is preaching so prominent in our corporate worship services? Almost half the time of a typical morning worship service is taken up with preaching the Word of God. That is a remarkable proportion and demands some explanation.

But why should I spend time teaching you about preaching, when you are not in seminary preparing to preach? There are three simple answers. First, you will know better what to do with preaching if you understand Biblically why it is here. Second, you will be able to assess whether you are, in fact, hearing the right kind of preaching if you know Biblically what it is supposed to be. Third, if you know what true preaching is, you will be able to discern and call the right kind of preacher when my time is up in this pulpit. So it has huge implications for your life and family and the future of the church - and all the churches - if the people of God know what true Biblical preaching is and why it is so prominent in corporate worship.

Now this question - Why is preaching so prominent in corporate worship? - is really two questions. One is: Why is the Word of God so prominent? And the other is: Why is this form of presenting the Word of God so prominent? Someone could simply read the Bible for half an hour rather than listen to preaching, and that would certainly make the Word of God prominent. Or one could lead a discussion of the Bible for a half-hour. Or one could do mainly academic analyses of vocabulary and grammar and historical circumstances in the Bible. So we must ask not only why is the Word so prominent, but why is preaching, as such, so prominent.

Let's take the first question: Why the prominence of God's Word in our corporate worship?

God Revealed Himself as the Word and by the Word

The first reason is that God has chosen to reveal himself as the Word and by the Word. John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word." Not in the beginning was the song, or in the beginning was the drama. God identifies his Son, who himself is God, as the Word. This is tremendously important. "In the beginning was the Word." The Son of God is the Word of God. He is God's communication to the world, God's Word.

God has also chosen to reveal himself not only as the Word but also by the Word. Look at our text, 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is inspired by God." This means that God ordained to speak to us and reveal himself to us and interpret his deeds in history for us by inspiring written words. That's what "scripture" means: writings. All the Scripture - all the writings in the Jewish-Christian canon - are inspired, God-breathed. Or as 2 Peter 1:21 says, "No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men, moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God." The scriptures of the Old and New Testament are God's revelation of himself to us.

So the first two answers to why the Word is so prominent in worship is that God revealed himself as the Word and by the Word. If worship is meant to be a spiritual communion with God and a reverent, loving response to God, then at the heart of worship must be the revelation of God himself, and he has ordained to be known mainly by his Word.

God Performs His Work by His Word

But we can say more. Worship is a response to God's work, and the Word of God is the means by which he works in the world. This is the way it was in the beginning when God created by his Word (Hebrews 11:3). And this is the way it has been ever since as God performs great acts by his Word. For example, we know that Jesus simply spoke and seas were calmed (Mark 4:39), fevers were cooled (Luke 4:39), demons were cast out (Mark 1:25), sins were forgiven (Mark 2:10), the blind received their sight (Luke 18:42), the dead were raised (Luke 7:14). God worked by means of his Word!

But we also know that God goes on working by his Word. Consider our text again: 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." In other words, the way God brings about the good works of his people is by the Word. This is why Jesus said that men will see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:16). God works by his Word to do his works through his people in his world.

You can see this again and again in the Bible. For example, Psalm 1:3 says that the man who meditates on the Word of God day and night will "be like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers." So the Word brings fruit and makes a person prosper in the will of God. Or consider Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The Word is God's agent in the great work of conviction and judgment. Or recall John 17:17, where Jesus prays to his Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." The great work of sanctification God does by the Word of God. And the list could go on and on.

The point is that worship is about knowing and admiring and savoring God through his works. And these works are seen in his Word and performed by his Word. Therefore the Word is prominent in worship.

God Brings About New Birth by His Word

Let me mention one other reason why the Word is so prominent in worship. Worship depends utterly on the spiritual miracle of the new birth and the ongoing work of reawakening faith. And these

miracles God does by the Word. For example, 1 Peter 1:23, "You have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God." New birth is worked by God through the Word. This means that the life we need to worship authentically comes by the Word. No life, no worship. No Word, no life.

Not only that, the constant reawakening of faith Sunday after Sunday comes by hearing the Word of Christ: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17) - not just the first time, but over and over again.

So the Protestant church has put the Word of God at the most prominent place in corporate worship because worship is a seeing and savoring of God himself, and God reveals himself as the Word, and by the Word. In particular, God does his works in the world by his Word and gives new life by his Word and awakens faith by his Word. Without the Word of God, there would be no life, no faith, no work, no revelation and no worship. The Word of God is to worship as air is to breathing.

Why Is Preaching so Prominent in Corporate Worship?

Now the second question is: Granted that the Word of God should be so prominent in worship, why is this particular form of the word called "preaching" so prominent?

Notice what follows in our text right after declaring that all Scripture is inspired by God (in 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Immediately Paul says (4:1-2), with amazing solemnity and high seriousness, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word." So it is clear that for this young minister of the Word (see 2 Timothy 2:15), preaching was to be a prominent activity. And the context of 3:16-17 seems to imply that preaching is not just for evangelism on the street corner or in the synagogue, but for the saints who need (as verse 2 says) "reproof, rebuke, exhortation, patience and instruction."

So we could say, we preach because 2 Timothy 4:2 says we should. But I want to go beneath that and ask *Why?* Why is it so fitting in God's scheme of things that preaching be so prominent in worship?

Old Testament and New Testament Precedents

One answer is that there is a Biblical precedent for explaining the Scriptures in public worship. For example, in Nehemiah 8:6-8 it says, "Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God; and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground . . . the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (RSV). So there was not only the reading of the law, but there were called and appointed men who "gave the sense" and "helped the people understand the law." And all that was in the context of blessing the Lord and lifting the hands and falling down in worship.

In the New Testament, the Jewish synagogue continued this pattern. For example, in Luke 4:16ff, Jesus came to Nazareth early in his ministry and entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and read from the prophet Isaiah about his own coming, and then sat down and began his interpretation: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). This was the typical synagogue pattern: the Word read and then an interpretation and application of the Word.

You see it also in the book of Acts. Paul comes to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch and in Acts 13:14-15 it says, "On the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, 'Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.'" And Paul stands up and preaches (verses 16-31).

So the first reason that preaching became central in the church was that this was the pattern established in the Old Testament and in the New Testament synagogue.

The Twofold Essence of Worship

But there are two reasons for the prominent place of preaching in worship that go deeper than this. They have to do with the twofold essence of worship: understanding God and delighting in God. Jonathan Edwards explains God's goal in worship like this:

God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to . . . their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in and enjoying the manifestations which He makes of Himself . . . *God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.* When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart.¹

So there are always two parts to true worship. We can say it in two pairs: there is seeing God and there is savoring God. You can't separate these. You must see him to savor him. And if you don't savor him when you see him, you insult him. Or another pair would be this: in worship there is always understanding with the mind and there is always feeling in the heart. Understanding must always be the foundation of feeling, or all we have is baseless emotionalism. But understanding of God that doesn't give rise to feeling for God becomes mere intellectualism and deadness. This is why the Bible continually calls us to think and consider and meditate and remember on the one hand, and to rejoice and fear and mourn and delight and hope and be glad on the other hand. Both are essential for worship.

Now preaching is the form that the Word of God takes in worship because true preaching is the kind of speech that consistently unites these two aspects of worship, both in the way it is done and in the aims that it has. When Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word," the word for "preach" is a word for "herald" or "announce" or "proclaim" (kh,ruxon). It is not a simple word for teach or explain. It is what a town crier did: "Hear ye, Hear ye, Hear ye! The King has a proclamation of good news for all those who swear allegiance to his throne. Be it known to you that he will give eternal life to all who trust and love his Son." I call this heralding "exultation." Preaching is a public exultation over the truth that it brings. It is not disinterested or cool or neutral. It is passionate about what it says.

Nevertheless this heralding contains teaching. You can see that as you look back to 2 Timothy 3:16 - the Scripture (which gives rise to preaching) is profitable for "teaching." And you can see it as you look ahead to the rest of 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction." So preaching is expository. It deals with the Word of God. True preaching is not the opinions of a mere man. It is the faithful exposition of God's Word.

Expository Exultation

So in a phrase, preaching is "expository exultation."

In conclusion, then, the reason that preaching is so prominent in worship is that worship is not just understanding but also feeling. It is not just seeing God, but also savoring God. It is not just the response of the mind, but also of the heart. Therefore God has ordained that the form his Word should take in corporate worship is not just explanation to the mind and not just stimulation to the heart. Rather the Word of God is to come teaching the mind and reaching the heart; showing the truth of Christ and savoring the glory of Christ; expositing the Word of God and exulting in the God of the Word.

That is what preaching is. And that is why it is so prominent in worship. It is not a mere work of man. It is a gift and work of the Holy Spirit. And therefore it happens most and best where a people are praying and spiritually prepared for it. That is what we will talk about next week.

For now, pray for me and pray for yourselves. And let us seek with all our might to become a people who live and worship by the power of the Word of God - read and memorized and taught and preached. Amen.

¹ Jonathan Edwards, The "Miscellanies," ed. by Thomas Schafer, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p, 495. Miscellany #448; see also #87, pp. 251-252; #332, p. 410; #679 (not in the New Haven Volume). Emphasis added.