

PRODUCER'S ESSAY

THE GOSPEL AND PREACHING

By Robin Gan

Many Christians rightly assume that preaching and the Gospel come together. The problem is that this assumption fails regularly to defend the cause of the Gospel and the ministry of our Lord Jesus, especially when the church faces seemingly attractive alternatives, as has been the case for at least some of the landscape of Malaysian Christianity. For instance, can leaders in your church articulate the criteria for nominating a preacher to the pulpit within a framework that is biblically informed and driven? Would such a framework include categories that would immediately recognise the failure to be faithful to the task given and expected of every preacher of God on this planet? Can this 'marking criteria' and its biblical basis be articulated clearly to the congregation such that both pulpit and pew are together engaged in the church of God for the building up of His people the church? A cursory glance at many disappointing examples of Sunday preaching around the world is a reminder that even if your church is doing well, wider Christian culture is never in a state that allows us to relax.

In Malaysia, this situation is even more acute. From the perspective of content or 'what informs or goes into a sermon to make it a faithful one', it is accurate to expect everything from exegetical to biblical-theological to systematic inputs for an outcome that is akin to that which Jesus and his apostles might expect of us. There is more to preaching of course, including the context and communication components, but at the level of what goes into a sermon, optimism would also be misplaced. - Biblical theology, which for many is already so difficult to master, is not taught as a core subject nor integrated cohesively into the entire system of theological thought in the vast majority of educational institutions for pastors, both locally and abroad. Many have already abandoned the study of the original languages, so critical for developing a mindset for the exegetical nuances involved in exposition and the careful appreciation of alternatives in interpretation. Historical theology, so critical in the appreciation that we stand on the shoulders of past saints, and even more so for hermeneutical humility, is taught with difficulty in the educational contexts of an ecumenically-minded culture. These are only some of the obvious obstacles to the proper theological training of a pastor in Malaysia. There are many many more. But they all amount to one thing: as the pulpit is unable to speak the entire counsel of God with all it can offer, the pews value it less and less. And ultimately, the people will choose to hear what they want. And the heart wants what it likes. Finance committees will allocate funds to only what is needed (read: liked) and senior pastors will choose what is familiar and proven etc and so the negative spiral spins flywheeling freely into an abyss.

The first question we have to deal with though is, is there such a thing as preaching? This will take some time and steps to answer, but given that one of the by-products of the Reformation was the democratisation of word ministry, in today's 'everyone is a minister of God standing in the gap' thinking, **the idea that there is such a thing as a specialised activity requiring specific selection, preparation and training called preaching sounds elitist and un-Protestant.** Writers like Tony Payne have for instance, observed that in Hillsong, the preaching was not so much preaching, but that of a guru 'sharing' within a context where 'church' was a spiritual experience of 'God' especially facilitated by emotive music and the entire production. In contrast, the Bible lays great emphasis on the knowability of God in His Word. Nowhere is this more emphatically presented than in John 1 when Jesus is called The Word. In Israel, at the very centre of their lives, in the place of meeting between God and his people, was the ark containing inviolably as it were, God's covenant word on tablets of law. From the first commands received for life versus death in the Garden through God's word to the Word being

incarnate in Jesus Christ then, all knowing and relating to God, all worship and love of God, all responsibility and accounting of disobedience, is by God's revealed word. This is manifest in the preaching of the second-generation preacher to the Hebrews,

(Heb 1:1-2 ESV) God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,
² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,

(Heb 2:3 ESV) ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,

Drawn no doubt from Jesus' own teaching,

(Joh 14:21 ESV) ²¹ Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.

(Joh 15:7-8 ESV) ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

(Joh 16:13 ESV) ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth,

(Joh 17:6-8 ESV) ⁶ "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me,

To know God and to be in fellowship with the Trinitarian Father, Son and Spirit, is to know Him by the revelation of Himself in His Son by His Spirit (cf. TTC 22). This continues to be true even with the claims by Christians in recent history that God reveals himself extra-biblically in dreams and other human experiences (which He is certainly capable of doing). Some Evangelicals have compromised in step with the pluralistic milieu of our times especially here in multi-cultural Malaysia where the national agenda has already made us comfortable with these conceptions of truth and religious views, but it is this that has driven preaching into a categorical change never envisaged by Jesus and the apostles, that of experiential spiritual opinion, designed in part to inspire, to lift up emotionally, a piece of religious oratory for psychological benefit. In the small sampling of the bible texts above, the expectation that the word heard will enable truly the church to be what God has planned for it since the Creation, is grounded in the God who has spoken in biblical-theologically understood salvation history, also known as 'the Gospel' or 'the word' in Pauline letters.

Anyone, with a rudimentary education in the nature of Scripture, the biblical-theological shape of the Bible, in the doctrine of Scripture as understood by the Reformers, or in apostolic preaching, should be able to understand this easily. In 2 Corinthians for instance, Paul contrasts the ministry of Christ (cf. 1.19-21; 3.3-4, 8-9) with the ministry of Moses and states emphatically that for any Christian (3.16), in hearing and receiving the preaching of the word of Christ (1.19; 4.5-6), they know the 'glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. An understanding of the Bible in its old and new covenant ministries, of the Christ and the preparatory role of the Old Testament Scriptures in revealing Him, automatically entails therefore the appreciation of preaching as the declaration and teaching of God's fulfilment of His Gospel in Christ. Such things should not be matters of confusion or debate 2000 years after the Resurrection. Whereas today we may find some in Christianity looking to imitate aspects of the Old Testament, Paul's perspective of our ministry even today is this:

(2 Cor 3:9-12 ESV) if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. ¹⁰ Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. ¹¹ For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. ¹² Since we have such a hope, we are very bold,

In studying the vocabulary of what might be considered preaching, Griffiths has found the above to be true in the semi-technical use of certain words in the New Testament. The three key words of 'euangelizomai' ('good news'), 'Katangellō' ('to announce'), 'Kēryssō' ('to proclaim'), 'are used with a high degree of consistency throughout the New Testament to denote the public, authoritative declaration of God's word by a commissioned leader'². The importance of these findings must also be appreciated in the fact that these word studies come from an examination of their use in the context of New Testament preaching. Any failure on our part then to share this definition of preaching as was understood by the New Testament preachers, points to a deviation from that same ministry. We would then be doing our own version of God's work, despite the 'best practice' laid down by the New Testament foundation, often at the cost of their lives. From Jeremiah to John the Baptist to John the apostle in fact, we see only the same consistent characteristic of all prophetic ministry, the speakers being conscious that the message they speak is of God from his words. That is, although preaching today is not the same as prophecy in the Old Testament, it is in continuity with it as a ministry now of the Lord Jesus in its declaration of His work and person. Drawing again for instance from 2 Corinthians above, on one hand, preaching cannot be the same as Old Testament prophecy in that it cannot be prefaced with 'The Lord saith to me', but declaring as it does and should, the very much greater Word fulfilled in Jesus, it says 'God has spoken'. In addition to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we see that in Romans 10, Paul cites Deu 30.14 and Isa 52.7, a combination which Paul uses to argue that God has sent both the Christ, and the preaching that is necessary, to render Israel inexcusable and for the church today to have received the Gospel that fulfils God's plans for the creation of His people. Again, in terms of the ministry of preaching then, all faithful Christian preaching not only stands together with the ministry of God in the Old Testament, it is the vital fulfilment of that ministry as Christ is declared today.

As a matter of fact, Paul commands that such an understanding of ministry and preaching is carried on and maintained in the church, 2 Tim 2.2. being typical of this entire outlook, to be found not only in the Pastoral Epistles but in his and the other apostles' writings. There is a clear appreciation for God's word having come to fulfilment in the Christ, and that this is now a deposit to be carefully guarded and protected from the many threats that exist against it and the church. This is clearly on Paul's mind as he finishes his course and ministry. We find this sentiment and pressing concern easily and abundantly in the many statements by Paul on this matter. Here is a sampling,

(2 Tim 1:13-14 ESV) ¹³ Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

(2 Tim 2:15 ESV) ¹⁵ 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.

² Jonathan I. Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study* (ed. D. A. Carson; vol. 42; New Studies in Biblical Theology; England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Apolllos, 2017), 121.

(1 Tim 6:3-4 ESV) ³ If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, ⁴ he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.

(Tit 2:1 ESV) you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

Does it look today like our churches are meeting Paul's mandate, in content, competency, conviction, character, concerns, Christ-centricity or any other alliterative criteria that expresses the Bible's understanding of word ministry as represented by preaching?

The testimony, practice and expectation of the ministers of the New Testament was for the church to continue having qualified preachers who would 'rightly handle the word of truth'. Much emphasis was laid upon this precisely because,

1. In the very nature of preaching, it reflects the character of God's ministry to us, that of His word, designed and designated for hearing with the right response. See for example, Heb 1.6,8; 2.11-12; 3.7; 4.12 and the various 'todays' of 3.7-15.
2. Through this ministry, salvation is carried out by God's Spirit, and the ministry of God's word is fulfilled. See for instance the texts previously cited from Joh 14-17 or in Rom 10 or 2 Cor.
3. From this ministry, all other ministries are fed and have their orientation, ordering, and growth. See Eph 4.1-16. (cf. Peter Orr for alternative interpretations of this text³)
4. With this ministry, the appointed leaders like Timothy could model a public form of Christianity, necessary for a life that has been teleologically designed for sanctification through imaging and therefore requiring imitation. See 1 Tim 4.7-16.
5. Under this ministry, Christ would continue to rule over His church and be the source of their growth into God as a holy temple in-dwelt by His Spirit Eph 2.20-22 cf. Col 2.18-19; 3.16.
6. It is therefore the very nature of the preaching of the word, that the church is its holy result, and the very nature of the church, to uphold and preserve and protect the ministry of preaching and the word. See Acts 20.28-30.

All claims to be Spirit-filled whilst Christ is not preached, and the word of God is not taught, and the Gospel not proclaimed, ring hollow and smack of faithless duplicity. Worse, paganism may have already taken over and made the 'church' a place of idol-worship.

With these summary points in view, can we honestly say that we have done enough to protect, nurture, and improve the ministry of preaching and the word in the history of Malaysian Christianity? Here is a simple way to check: take a look at our collective wallets. And then hear what is coming from our pulpits. And then get amongst the people in their lives, and see what fruit there is.

For all their flaws, this is something the Reformers understood was missing and distorted in the medieval church. Michael Allen makes the following observations:

Reformed theologians **linked holiness with the doctrine of the church**. Zwingli's "Sixty-Seven Articles" of 1523 made strong use of the body metaphor from Paul's teaching to the Corinthians. Thesis 8 notes that "all who live in the Head are His

³ Peter C. Orr, "[Paul and Pastors in Ephesians: The Pastor as Teacher.](#)" in *Paul as Pastor* (ed. Brian S. Rosner, Andrew S. Malone, and Trevor J. Burke; London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 83.

members and children of God. And this is the Church or fellowship of the saints.”²⁴⁸ Zwingli clearly identified the church as the “saints” or holy ones in as much as they are in Christ. At the same time, in several theses (theses 7, 9, and 10) Zwingli also insisted that identity as saints is impossible apart from the Head of that body, Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Tetrapolitan Confession of 1530 got even more specific and stated that from the church “Christ is never absent, but he sanctifies it to present it at length to himself blameless, not having spot or wrinkle.”²⁵⁹ **Christ makes holy a church**—not merely an aggregate of individuals but a congregation of saints. Election for Reformed theologians was individual, but it was personal and specific within a broader corporate purpose: men and women are elected to be in the body of Christ, wherein they enjoy that union with the incarnate Head and flourish in harmony with his guidance. As the Belgic Confession says, “All men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it ... to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God hath established it.”³⁶⁰

Reformed theologians also attested that the place of **growing in grace was tied to the ongoing practice of certain means of grace: the reading and preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments**. Reformed theology insisted that sacraments required the lordly warrant of Christ’s specific command. Other spiritual practices may be well and good (such as confession and repentance of sin), but they do not merit the title *sacrament* unless they are perpetually commanded by the Lord himself, that is, practices “which Christ our Lord hath instituted.”³⁷¹

A particularly distinctive development was **the place of discipline** in the Reformed vision of the Christian life. Martin Bucer was pivotal in this regard, noting that discipline was a third mark of the Christian church (alongside the preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments). The church was always viewed as an eschatological project, on its way to glory but not yet there⁸

Regardless of what our views may be about sacraments and discipline, the theological thought here is clear. Christ demands good ecclesiology, and that is why His teaching holds a key place in the church’s life and health. Is this not what we have already seen from the Scriptures before this?

We could discuss at great length the formal and environmental reasons for why the church has got to this point historically. Indeed the Malaysian context has almost its own centre of gravity, its own galaxy of elements making up the problem. But it is possible to identify one broad

⁴²⁸ “Zwingli’s Sixty-Seven Articles” (1523), in Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 37.

⁵²⁹ “The Tetrapolitan Confession” (1530), in Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions*, 73.

⁶³⁰ “The Belgic Confession” (1561), in Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions*, 209.

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁸ Michael Allen, “[Sanctification, Perseverance, and Assurance](#),” in *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary* (ed. Matthew Barrett; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 561–562.

pattern in the post-Reformation world that has resulted from that key event in Western history. Whether we are consciously aware of it, the Reformation for many has captured a romantic impulse common to all men after Gen 3, the desire to be free in our reading and interpretation of text and truth. Post-modernism may have died in academia, but in Asia, it has never really needed to arrive. We have always found ways to be individually-minded in the midst of corporate conformity. In Evangelicalism in this part of the world therefore, we have kept the church post-Reformation, but both pulpit and pew have made sure it is *our* church, the local church, the fellowship, the community, the spiritual family. Even in our understanding of salvation, the subject has often been the individual, not the biblical-theological salvific concerns displayed by God in His Scripture.

Theologically this may be seen in soteriology coming before ecclesiology, when the two are in fact inextricably bound together. What Luther did to make sure the order was correctly set (the word gives birth to the church) has conveniently fitted into our own aspirations for what church should be for us, and any attempt to raise ecclesiological concerns are immediately open to the accusation of 'Gospel plus' and 'cult-like' or 'not Word-centered / Gospel-centered'. Compare this prevailing firewall to the following views of the well-known orthodox Presbyterian theologian Robert Letham,

'As a resurrection community, the church is both the locus and the bearer of salvation.'

'It is fairly easy to see the church as the *bearer* of salvation.' 'the church is also the *locus* of salvation insofar as there is no other place where salvation is to be found.'

'it is clear that soteriology and ecclesiology are integrally connected, both being outflows of the accomplishment of Christ. In this we are distancing ourselves from two prominent positions, those of traditional Roman Catholicism and of much modern Anglo-Saxon evangelicalism. In the first place, Roman Catholicism has traditionally subordinated soteriology to ecclesiology.'

'Modern evangelicalism in Britain and North America has gone to the opposite extreme. Soteriology comes first and ecclesiology straggles far behind. The key thing is to have Christ as your personal Saviour and Lord. The individual is paramount. The post-Renaissance focus on the individual person has come to dominate in the church to such an extent that entire areas of crucial biblical teaching on corporate solidarity sound strange and alien, if they are ever heard at all. Yet Paul describes salvation in fundamentally corporate terms, as being in Christ and being raised with Christ. Following from that, church membership has in practice been seen as little more than an optional extra on far too many occasions for comfort. Trust Christ? Yes. Join a church? Maybe, later, when the time is right. Allied to this has been a neglect, even an undermining of the sacraments. Baptism is frequently seen as an act of personal obedience to Christ, as a testimony to others, as a step on the road of discipleship and therefore as something which can come later on, somewhere down the road. The persistent New Testament practice of baptizing at the very point when a person can first be regarded as a Christian (whether at conversion or at birth to believing

parents) is often lacking. In modern evangelicalism, soteriology and ecclesiology have been separated radically.’⁹

It is not hard to see then where preaching stands and why. If the ‘evangelical’ can hardly see the church as more than a byproduct of Christianity and is already benefits-driven in his choice of church, viewing any attempt to elevate the church with due ‘Protestant’ suspicion, then how would the treatment of preaching be any different, even with regard to preaching that is for example ‘expositional’? Positive response to such ‘methods of preaching’ may well be part of a larger benefits-driven orientation to all things Christian. If it makes me happy/edified/lifts me up, sure, why not?

A recovery of preaching in Malaysia, beginning with the Klang Valley, therefore, cannot simply be the introduction of methods of preaching, or convincing pastors of the effectiveness of expositional preaching etc. That would be to heal the paralytic when his sin is the biggest and the whole problem. As always in FWC then, the problem with preaching, is the problem of the Gospel, but the problem with the Gospel today is most certainly the problem of preaching. Both the Fellowship and FWC are little interested in dealing with one at the expense or isolation of the other. So yes, let’s make sure we understand the ministry of preaching and the word. But let’s not forget everything else that is involved in building and protecting healthy churches.

Bibliography:

- Tony Payne on the preaching at Hillsong Briefing, <http://thebriefing.com.au/2007/01/the-surprising-face-of-hillsong/>

⁹ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (ed. Gerald Bray; Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 214–220.