

# The End Of Preaching

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**I**t's Saturday night and the sermon script is long-written and rehearsed.

Now is the time for prayer. What does the preacher beg the Lord to bring from his preaching? Paramount among his prayers will be that God glorify Himself (1 Corinthians 10.31) as His great deeds are recounted, as unbelievers are called to repentance and faith, and as believers are called to the good works which constitute a life worthy of the Gospel (Ephesians 2.10; Philippians 1.27).

What is the end, or goal, of preaching? The purpose of this article is to examine one text of Scripture where the Lord Himself defines the profitable uses of Scripture, and to apply this to the ministry of preaching.

Why examine this question? For one thing, it contributes to a biblical understanding of the nature of preaching, especially in relationship to other Word ministries such as personal evangelism, teaching, biblical counseling, and Bible study. Further, a clearer grasp of why we preach should sharpen the preacher's sword (Ephesians 6.17b; Hebrews 4.12,13) and better enable the Word of the Lord to return to Him having accomplished the purposes for which He gave it (Isaiah 55.11).

Why examine this question from the Scriptures? Because preaching is a God-appointed task. The matter and manner of preaching should be determined from God speaking in Scripture and, likewise, the purposes of preaching should also come from Scripture.

## **The Text: 2 Timothy 3.15-17**

Second Timothy 3.15-17 is a much-frequented text for its word on the nature of Scripture as the all-inspired written Word. However,

there is more to the text than this important teaching, for the text is also rich in comment on the uses of Scripture.

Consider the text: 'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.' (ESV)

The text first gives a reminder that Scripture can and should be taught from childhood and should continue to be taught and believed into adulthood (3.14,15a). This is a rebuke to those who would assert that only those who have left childish ways behind are able to receive, understand, and believe God's Word.

The nature of all Scripture is defined as God-breathed, or inspired. Just as a person's breath comes from within and is a deep expression of who they are, so it is with the words of Scripture. The words of Scripture are breathed through the writers whom God carried along by His Spirit and with each writer having his distinctive marks (2 Peter 1.21). However, the biblical words are firstly, fully, and finally God's words, not those of the human writers. This gives the Bible (and preaching built on it) authority, and it gives the preacher confidence in his task.

Our interest as preachers is in the ends for which Scripture is profitable or useful.

### **The Uses Of Scripture**

Three distinct purposes within one overriding goal can be identified for Scripture from 2 Timothy 3.15-17.

First, Scripture is useful to convey wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (3.15b). More than one unbeliever has been brought to faith through reading the Bible and hearing it preached faithfully (*eg* Acts 8.26-38). This is because the whole Bible speaks of humanity's need of a Saviour and God's generous provision of Him in the Lord Jesus (*eg* Luke 24.27, 44-47). The preacher need not preach a specifically evangelistic sermon for sinners to come under conviction and come into repentance and faith. God in His providence can and does use any part of His Word to convict and convert. And indeed it is worth remembering that 2 Timothy 3.16 is talking most immediately about the Old Testament as the source of saving wisdom in Jesus. The whole Bible can draw conversions.

This is the first and foundational use of the Bible and the purpose for any Word ministry. Unless and until a person has wisdom for salvation through faith in Jesus, the Bible's other intended uses will not profit.

What point is there to knowledge of sound doctrine without a saving knowledge of Jesus? What futility is there in trying to live a righteous life unless having first come to the righteousness that God provides through grace to the one believing in His Son?

Good preaching will thus always have a Gospel element. Unbelievers may be present in the regular service (and hopefully are). Believers need reminding of their need of a Saviour and the Lord's provision for them that they may continue to rest on Him for salvation and to be motivated by gratitude to the life of following Jesus. Indeed, it can be said that no Scripture has been well preached unless in some way it points to God's salvation through Jesus. This is the first, and perhaps the greatest use of Scripture.

Secondly, Scripture is useful to teach sound doctrine and to correct falsehood (3.16b).

In the Great Commission Jesus commands that disciples are to be made from all nations (evangelism) and are then to be taught to obey all that He had taught (Matthew 28.19,20). This relates to the second and third uses of Scripture identified in 2 Timothy 3.16,17. Left to themselves, new converts are clueless of what to believe about God, for the natural man cannot understand the things of God (1 Corinthians 2.14). The things of God must be revealed – and that revelation is found in Scripture. Even the long-standing believer is apt to have incomplete and false ideas about God. Put simply: we all need to be taught truth about God and to have our wrong ideas addressed and put right.

Truth alone will never make a mature Christian, but we cannot be mature Christians without it. And so there is a need to move on from the spiritual milk of infancy to solid food (1 Peter 2.2; Hebrews 5.11-6.1). This is the whole counsel of God that helps protect God's people against the wolves who would destroy the flock, and which also helps to build up the saints into that likeness to Christ which is the mark of spiritual adulthood (Acts 20.26-29; Ephesians 4.11-16).

Despite the impatience of our times for doctrine, preachers should not be afraid to teach truths about God which are to be known and believed. As noted below, right teaching is the indispensable foundation for right belief and right behaviour.

Thirdly, Scripture is useful to rebuke wrong behaviour and to train in right behaviour (3.16b). As the fruits of the fall abound, and

public standards of behaviour become less godly, it is vital to use the Bible to address godly behaviour both in the positive sense of training in right actions and in exposing and warning against wrong actions (Ephesians 4.17-32). Godly behaviour is unnatural to the convert, who needs to train himself for godliness (see 1 Timothy 4.7).

So also is it with the eradication of the bad habits of an unbelieving past. Today's new convert in the West is likely to have come from a godless background and to have dabbled in false spiritualities, various sexual relationships, and possibly drug use. New converts from traditional cultures have been reared in the behaviours of those cultures that will include all manner of ungodliness. Such converts may be clueless about godly living, just as Paul's converts from Gentile society were.

The long-standing Christian also needs training in right behaviour. Emerging ethical issues and changing life-stages throw up new challenges that call for clear biblical direction. For example, consider the childless couple offered methods of artificial conception that take them to the boundaries of their marriage relationship. Further, the gravity of the old man will keep pulling even the mature Christian to lower standards of behaviour with the deceptive logic that even if I lower my standards I am still better than my godless neighbour.

Good preaching on the Bible will not be content with just teaching truth to the head, but will apply it to the life in specific, contemporary behavioural comments that address the real issues in the lives of the hearers rather than someone else's issues or the issues of another day and age.

The overriding goal of all these uses is full readiness for every good work (3.17). We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, and might through the teaching and learning of His Word (Deuteronomy 6.1-9). Another way of expressing this is to say that Scripture is addressed to the whole person as follows:

- The heart is addressed with wisdom for salvation through faith in Jesus, which is orthocardia or right belief.
- The head is addressed by correcting false beliefs and teaching sound doctrine, which is orthodoxy or right doctrine.
- The hands are addressed by the rebuke of wrong behaviour and training in right behaviour, which is orthopraxis or right action.

When head, heart and hands are all aligned under the word of God, the whole person is brought to complete readiness in God-glorifying and God-serving humanity.

All of this is in view in Ephesians 4.11-16 where the process of Christian maturity is in view. Such maturity arises from the gifts of the ascendant Christ who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers to enable the work of ministry that promotes Christ-likeness. It is notable that all four of the listed offices are Word ministries. The apostles were given to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6.4).

New Testament prophecy is a disputed topic, but is best understood as a Word ministry especially focussed on the individual and group application of the Word. Evangelists have a ministry of declaring the Word of Gospel salvation. Pastor-teachers are those entrusted with the regular teaching and application of the Word to a settled congregation. The point is clear from both 2 Timothy 3.15-17 and Ephesians 4.11-16: it is balanced and purposeful ministries of the Word that promote Christian maturity.

### **The Use Of The Uses: Preaching And Other Word Ministries**

There is a sense in which all Word ministries have all of the above purposes in mind, for the text itself does not confine these uses just to preaching. However, there will be differences of emphasis in different Word ministries.

- The evangelist is especially concerned with using the Bible to the end of saving faith.
- The teacher is especially concerned to use the Bible to teach sound doctrine and to correct false doctrine.
- The Bible study leader is especially interested in making and reinforcing life-applications to behaviour.
- The counsellor is especially concerned to see changes in heart-attitudes and in behaviours.

The work of the preacher embraces all of these concerns. He wants to change the head and heart in order to change the life. He wants to inform the head in order to transform heart and life. Of all the Word ministries, the preacher cannot pick and choose among the various uses of the Word as he declares the whole counsel of God.

Of course, depending on the text, the hearers, and the context, a preacher may accommodate the sermon to a different balance of emphases among the uses, but none will ever disappear entirely from view. This simultaneous focus on all the listed uses of Scripture is but one distinctive of preaching among the word ministries.

## **The End Of Preaching**

Let's go back to our imaginary preacher whom we left with his Saturday evening prayers. Imagine that it is now earlier in the week. He has chosen the portion of Scripture to preach on and has engaged in prayerful, God-dependent, Spirit-guided, and disciplined study of his text in order to rightly divide the Word.

A clear scripturally-formed sense of purpose in preaching can be used to guide the sermon preparation process, with 2 Timothy 3.15-17 becoming a checklist:

- Which of these uses, and in what form and balance, do the text and occasion most lend themselves to?
- How can the chosen purposes be woven into the sermon structure, such that the main points, sub-points, illustrations, and applications are sharpened, like an arrow, into a sermon with no wasted words or blunt edges?
- When the draft script is culled, what material is surplus to purpose and can be reduced or removed?
- How can hearers be challenged to ask what they should know, believe, and do in response to the word?

And finally, come Saturday night the preacher knows to what end the prayers for his own preaching can be directed.