

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Preaching to the Heart

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For years homileticians have been exhorting preachers to "preach to the heart." But what are they talking about? Do you know? Do *they*? Is the concept Biblical, and if so, how does one do it?

The blame for confusion about what it means to "preach to the heart" does not lie solely with homileticians, while preachers go off scot-free. Homileticians should make themselves clear. But if they don't, it is the responsibility of the preachers to pound on their doors until they do. So neither is guiltless. There has been a conspiracy of ignorance in which words and phrases have been uttered again and again as though the speakers and the listeners knew perfectly well what they were talking about, when all the while they did not. As a homiletician who has been at fault in this matter, I believe something must be done. It is time the whole matter were cleared up. That is the point of this book.

The first Christian sermon, preached on the day of Pentecost by the apostle Peter, was preached to the heart. Luke wrote: "Now when they heard this, they were stung to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers what should we do?' " (*Acts 2:37*). That crowd's response was the fruit of effective preaching, empowered by the Holy Spirit. But effective, heart-penetrating preaching can also lead to the opposite response: "Now when they heard these things, they were pierced through to their hearts and gnashed their teeth at him" (*Acts 7:54*).

When Peter preached, great numbers repented and believed the Gospel; when Stephen preached, his listeners killed him. Yet both were filled with the Spirit and preached to the heart. This double and opposite response makes one thing clear at the outset: while preaching to the heart is a desirable effect brought about by the power of the Spirit, the exact nature of that effect on the listener may vary greatly and cannot be predicted beforehand. In either case, Spirit empowered, Biblical preaching strikes squarely at the heart. It elicits a response. No hearer can remain apathetic: *He must respond*. To speak of preaching to the heart, then, is to speak of preaching that brings a definitive response; it is preaching that evokes words and action from the listener.

What Is the Heart?

A clear idea of what the Bible means by *heart* is foundational to all else that we shall consider in this little book. Indeed, the widespread, careless use of that word is responsible for the confusion and vagueness that surround exhortations to preach to the heart.

"But," you object, "everyone knows what *heart* means. I don't see why you are making such a fuss over it. Surely it doesn't take an entire chapter to define something so obvious, does it?" Yes. You see, that's exactly what is wrong: everyone thinks he understands the terms, but very few do. Ask

yourself, "Exactly what does the word *heart* mean in the Scriptures?" Can you give a precise definition?" Well, maybe not an exact one, but I know what it means, nevertheless."

Do you?

Let's test your understanding a bit, okay? What do you think of the often-quoted sentiment, "What we need is more heart knowledge and not just head knowledge"? Do you think it does or does not convey an acceptable idea of *heart* as the word is used in the Bible?

"Well, I guess so, but I'm not sure; anyhow, I know what the sentence is getting at."

What?

"It is saying that it isn't enough to merely know truth, that truth must grip you—it has to affect your emotions as well."

You are probably correct about the way that sentence is used; but the fact is, it suggests an incorrect interpretation of the Biblical word *heart*. If *heart* is used to refer to feelings or emotions as over against thought or intellect, that use is discordant with Scripture. Never in the Bible is the word *heart* set over against the head or the intellectual processes. That is a modern, Western idea of heart, introduced into the Bible from the outside. One would never get that idea from the Bible itself. Indeed, that is a Roman rather than a Biblical view of the heart. The Valentine's Day cupid, shooting arrows through little red or pink hearts, is the culprit behind this modern, unbiblical view. To Western origins may be attributed all of our romantic notions, which include the idea of heart-as-feeling. No such conception can be found in the Scriptures.

Consider instead what *is* contrasted with the word *heart* in the Bible. In *Matthew* 15:8, for instance, we read that the people honor God "with their lips, but their heart is far from" him. That sort of contrast is regularly made in the Scriptures. You find the same thing in the well-known passage in *Romans* 10 in which we are told that it is not enough to confess Christ with the mouth; the one making the profession also must believe in his heart. Notice the

contrast: heart/lips, heart/mouth. In the important passage *1 Samuel* 16:7, we are assured that "man looks on the outward appearances but [in contrast] God looks on the heart." Plainly, in all of these pivotal passages there is a contrast between the heart as something inner and the lips, mouth, and appearance as something outer. That is the true Biblical contrast, not a contrast between intellect and emotion.

The word *heart* has become a devalued currency in our culture. Preachers too often read the modern Western view of heart-as-emotional-commitment back into Scripture and thus mistake and distort what the Holy Spirit moved the writers of the Bible to say. It is time to restore the true Biblical content of the word so that we may profit from an understanding of those many passages in which it occurs.

If the heart of man in the Bible refers to the inner life, from which all else flows, what is the point of preaching to the heart? In the light of this meaning, we may say that preaching that goes to the heart genuinely affects the person. He has been hit at the very source of his whole life (*Proverbs* 4:23). He has been pierced by the preached Word where it counts. This does not necessarily mean that he is converted or, in the case of a believer, that he will repent of his sin, but it does mean that the sermon has truly hit home. That is why, whether the response is favorable or unfavorable, preaching that pierces the heart is preaching that elicits a response. It could not do otherwise because, as we have just seen, the heart is the source of every response. It also may be said that preaching that penetrates or cuts through to the heart is preaching that elicits a *genuine* response—whether it be faith or fury. Preaching that gets through to the heart does not leave the listener apathetic.

In contrast, preaching that does not go to the heart of a man is preaching without any genuine effect. While the listener may express gratitude for the help he has received, the words on his lips do not flow from heartfelt conviction. In time, his speech and actions will reflect the true condition of his heart. "By their fruits shall you know them." When the inner man is truly affected by the Word for good,

that will lead to a positive, lasting change in his outward behavior. The outer and inner man will come into closer sync through discernible patterns of growth.

So, you can see how desirable it is to preach to the heart. Indeed, a strong Biblical case could be made that unless preaching penetrates deeply enough to affect the inner life, it is not preaching at all. True Biblical preaching changes people. It did in Bible times, and there is no reason why it will not do so today.

Boldness of Heart

If there is one characteristic that typifies modern preaching, it is its insipid, obsequious approach to speaking the truth. So unlike the early preachers, the Reformers, and the great preachers of all time, many modern Bible-believing preachers seem afraid to tell it like it is. And yet, that modern phrase, "tell it like it is," indicates that people generally appreciate hearing truth for what it is, even when what they hear isn't altogether pleasant. But it seems that in Christian circles, in particular, there is a pseudo-pious reserve or over sophistication in which hypersensitive listeners are horrified by anything frank in preaching. There is, therefore, something wrong with modern preaching and in many of those who have been brought up on it that must be corrected. It is basically a willingness to compromise—even God's truth—which stems from a lack of boldness.

I am not commending rudeness or crudeness. These unnecessary characteristics are often assumed to be synonymous with boldness. But there is nothing rude or crude about the preaching in the book of Acts. The preaching found there is straightforward, clear, explicit, hard-hitting, and—in short—bold. In fact, the only feature of apostolic preaching described in *Acts* is its boldness.

It was said that when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, they recognized that "they had been with Jesus." The way some prissy Christians today look aghast at any boldness in preaching, you would think instead that a bold preacher had been with the devil! Most people, however, recognize a truly bold

preacher as an unusual man and are interested in him and often in what he has to say. One reason why much contemporary preaching not only fails to reach the heart, but is so uninteresting, is that it is timid and pale. Bold preaching is never dull.

What is boldness? The Greek word *parresia* means freedom in speaking, openness, willingness to be frank; it is plain speech that is unencumbered by fear. A bold preacher is one who has no fear of speaking the truth—even when it hurts. Many ministries are hampered today simply because of the fear of men. "Will Mrs. Jones take offense if I preach this?" "What will happen if I teach this to the congregation?" and similar thoughts go through the minds of far too many preachers, even when what they ought to be asking themselves is, "What will God think of me if I don't teach his truth?"

There is far too little teaching about judgment, hell, and the other doctrines on the dark side of the scriptural spectrum. There is too little reproof of sin. There is too little church discipline and confronting error, even when it is seriously affecting the membership of the church. There is a fear of controversy.

In some circles, the fear of controversy is so great that preachers and congregations following after them will settle for peace at any cost—even at the cost of truth, God's truth. The idea is that peace is all-important. Peace is a Biblical ideal (*Romans* 12:18 makes that clear: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with everybody"), but so is purity. The peace of the church may never be bought at the cost of the purity of the church. That price is too dear. But why do we think that we can get along in this world—or for that matter, even in the church—without conflict and controversy? Jesus didn't. Paul didn't. None of the preachers of the apostolic age who faithfully served their Lord were spared controversy. Who are we to escape controversy when they did not? The story of the advance of the church across the Mediterranean world from Jerusalem to Rome is a story of controversy. When the Gospel is preached boldly, there will be controversy. Most of the Epistles themselves were called forth to counter error of doctrine and sinfulness of life. In them there is

controversy. The life of Paul is a life of controversy. Tradition tells us that every apostle except John, who was exiled for his faith, died a violent death.

What is this hypersensitivity that is so often found among a particular brand of evangelicals today? Children around us grow up on TV and movies that feature not only conflict, but violence and crudity. Who in our age is so allergic to frankness that the open preaching of God's Word will cause him to break out in horror? Pale, insipid preaching is what drives people from Christ and the church, not bold preaching. It seems to me that the problem with hypersensitive evangelicals is not really the one stated up front—offending those to whom we preach—but, more often than not, simply a lack of boldness. And that lack of boldness boils down to a simple fear of men—fear of the consequences of telling it like it is.

Boldness characterized the preaching of the apostles and other early preachers, Luke says. Let's take just a brief glimpse at a bit of their preaching. When the 3,000 were stung in their hearts, what sort of preaching was it that led to that? First of all, we see that it was preaching that did not hesitate to contradict the expressed ideas of men. Some said that the 120 who were speaking in foreign languages were drunk. But when Peter got up to preach, the very first words out of his mouth contradicted this foolish accusation: "Certainly these people aren't drunk, as you imagine; it's only nine o'clock in the morning!" (*Acts* 2:15). Well-meaning and fearful preachers will tell you that to openly contradict the audience is a poor preaching tactic—especially at the beginning of a sermon! But Peter had not read the experts; he simply relied on the Holy Spirit and went ahead speaking the truth. To win friends and influence people, you are supposed to begin by gaining agreement. But Peter was more interested in the truth than in manipulating people by selling techniques.

Not only did Peter begin all wrong, according to the experts, but he was far too frank when he discussed his congregation's behavior. After all, Peter, it isn't polite to say such things as "this Man, delivered up by God's predetermined plan and foreknowledge, you killed by crucifixion!" (*Acts* 2:23). That sounds

like a direct accusation, if not an attack on the audience. You'll never get anywhere that way, Peter. But Peter isn't finished. Listen to the conclusion: "So then, let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ." Now there you've done it, Peter! Just when it looked as if you might have pulled your sermon out of the fire after that opening blunder, you went ahead and spoiled everything by adding that last dig, "whom you crucified." And, while I'm at it, let me tell you something else, Peter. You will never get anywhere using the second person in preaching; it's too personal. It is possible that you might have gotten away with saying everything you said—even those all-too-frank accusations—if you had only phrased them in the third person, in a more abstract way.

Preaching from God's Heart

The preachers God uses are men who are *after* (literally, "as") his heart. That is to say, they understand God's purposes and his ways, they are in harmony with them, and they are anxious to tell others about them. The concerns they have were first God's concerns. Such shepherds feed God's flock what he wants them to: "knowledge and understanding." Where do they get it? From his Word. Men who preach to the heart, then, are men who know God's Word, who personally accept and are molded by God's Word, and who, as a result, are capable of feeding others on that life-giving and nourishing Word. So, the preacher must be capable of understanding God's Word and feeding others on it.

The source of heart-reaching messages is the Bible. "Faith" comes from hearing the Word (*Romans* 10:17). Prophets and apostles had direct revelation from God; today we have that same revelation in an inscripturated form. The idea of the written Word of God is not recent; it is Biblical. The Bible calls itself God's Word (compare especially *Psalms* 119), despite what liberals confidently say to the contrary. So, if preachers wish not only to preach to the heart, but to preach in ways that are pleasing to God, they must preach "after [as] his heart." To do that, they must learn his thoughts and intents (heart) and become attuned to them in their own lives. They

may learn from the Bible all that is necessary to preach (compare *2 Timothy* 3:16-17). Indeed, there is only one way to preach to hearts: to preach from God's heart; but God has revealed his heart only in his written Word.

How tragic, therefore, that men in the pulpit prattle on about the ideas of other men, share their own opinions, and feed God's sheep on diets of everything else. All the while, food provided by God—available, nourishing, life-giving—is almost totally neglected. Preacher, you will preach to the heart only when you preach from God's heart. You will preach from God's heart only when you know what is in his heart. And you will know what is in his heart only when you know his Word. You must dedicate yourself, therefore, to a thorough study of that Word so that you will truly become a workman in the Word who does not need to be ashamed, because you have accurately handled the Word of truth (*2 Timothy* 2:15) in your preaching.

A Heart-adapted Form

In *Colossians* 4:3, 4, Paul wrote: "... praying at the same time also about us, that God may open for us a door for the Word, to speak about the secret of Christ, because of which I am in bonds, so that I may proclaim it clearly, as I ought to." To "proclaim it clearly, as I ought to"—those words have to do with form.

Paul's one goal was to avoid anything that might obscure God's truth and to do everything that he could to present it as clearly as possible. There is no contradiction between that desire and an unwillingness to have his listeners' faith depend upon something other than the Gospel of Christ. In fact, the two concerns dovetail: if anything obscures the Gospel, it isn't possible for people to understand and believe it. Preacher, that means that you must not seek to become a Demosthenes, calling attention to your rhetorical powers, but you must do whatever is necessary to be sure that your proclamation of the convicting, nourishing Word is clear. You must aim not at the applause of men, but at reaching their hearts.

Clarity is one prerequisite pertaining to form that is essential to preaching to the heart. How sad it is that preachers do not work more on this matter of clarity. How important it must be if the apostle Paul himself was concerned enough about it to ask for prayer. Have you ever asked your congregation to pray for clarity in your preaching? Have you ever asked them to pray about your preaching at all? Clarity is the thing. Paul was right—that is how he was to speak; preacher, it is also how you ought to speak.