

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it (Heb. 2.1).

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (10.24-25).

Introduction

We do many things when we gather as the church on Sunday. Here, in the Westminster Reformed Church, we have a very simple and straightforward church service. Looking back over the past years of our gatherings causes me to ask, "What is primary in our church services?" This has to become the question, "What should be primary according to Scripture and how do we match up with Scripture?"

So how would you answer the dual question, "What is and what should be primary in the Sunday assembly?" Hopefully the answer is the same for both. So let's focus on this "ought to" question regarding conduct in the household of God, which is the church (**the pillar and foundation of the truth**, 1 Tim. 3:15). What ought to be primary when we assemble? Some may answer this question by citing worship as primary. And I can hardly disagree in the sense that everything we do when we assemble is an act of worship. But I am looking at this question in this way: given that the assembly is a worship assembly, we can still ask, "What is primary in the worship assembly?"

My answer is that preaching is primary in the gathering for worship. That is what I want to stress in the context of having our annual church meeting a little later today: "The Primacy of Preaching in the Assembly." I want to defend the primacy of preaching and then apply it noting that this is an application of Hebrews 2.1 and 10.24-25.

1A. Support for the Primacy of Preaching

To defend up front like this is in keeping with the goal of rooting all we do in Scripture. Two lines of biblical teaching support this claim: the elements of worship support the primacy of preaching and the nature of worship supports it.

1B. First, the elements of worship support the primacy of preaching

What are the elements of worship in the assembly? Prayer, giving, the sacraments, singing, reading, and preaching are the elements of worship. Now what is at the core of each as far as the gathering is concerned? How do these elements relate to each other showing that the preaching element is primary?

1) Prayer and giving

Prayer and giving are directed to a wide variety of concerns regarding those in need but a very specific core of both related to church life is the ministry of the word of God. Giving enables the minister to do the work of the word (he is like an ox that is not to be muzzled while treading the grain, 1 Tim. 5:17-18; Gal. 6:6). And prayer for the ministry of the word petitions the Lord for clarity, boldness, and God's open door in gospel proclamation (Col. 4:2-4). Prayer and giving are acts of worship performed when we assemble (**bring your gifts on the first day of the week**, 1 Cor. 16:2, and pray with the saints saying, "Our Father," Mat. 6.9). Prayer and giving relate to preaching in a critical way: enabling the work of the word versus, for example, bricklaying on six days and then preaching on one day.

Now, think of how giving to the ministry of the word and praying for the ministry of the word impacts your conduct in the assembly (how it impacts worship). If you give of the provisions of life that God has given you, and you give prayerfully to the ministry of the word that it be clear, bold, and expansive, then these things cultivate an attitude and interest in your heart toward the Lord, the church, and preaching. How could you give so that the word may be preached with clarity and not have that affect your attendance and expectations? How could you

pray for bold preaching (earnestly, regularly and from the heart), and not have that affect your conscience? Giving and praying for the ministry of the word prepare your heart and conscience to receive the word. Surely, you *do not* want your money wasted. And surely you *do* want your prayers answered.

Thus, even though giving and praying do not take up the whole time of worship (that is not all that we do nor is it most of what we do), nevertheless, they prepare our expectations and they cultivate a ready conscience. Think of the posture of giving. You give with your hands opened wide, which is a position of readiness to receive. Think of the posture of prayer for the word: it is not, "Lord I pray for clear and bold preaching for the others, but of course not for me." The posture of prayer for clarity and boldness cultivates a willingness (true prayer does this) to receive the double-edged sword that "**judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart**" (Heb. 4:12), of your heart!

We should recall that the context of the living and active word relates to the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God, which is weekly rest *in anticipation of heavenly eternal rest* (Heb. 3:1-4:13). Sabbath rest includes coming under the living and active word that divides the soul and judges the heart. Prayer for the ministry of the word on the Lord's Day Sabbath prepares you to receive it in a soul searching and thus life edifying way.

Therefore, in short, giving and praying accent the primacy of preaching in the gathered assembly on the Lord's Day. If you give of what you have by the sweat of your brow and if you give praying for clear and bold preaching, then in a very practical way you are placing a premium on preaching. You represent your hard work in giving as an act of worship. By worshipful giving you thank the Lord for all you receive from His hand. Central in prayer is petition is for God's blessing by His word. Therefore, these acts of worship *point away from themselves to the proclamation of the gospel*.

2) Baptism and communion

The sacraments of baptism and communion are word signs or gospel signs. They express the gospel in visual form; we call them preaching rites. Accordingly, Calvin says that the job of the minister is to point the people to where the sacraments point, to the gospel of cleansing and nourishment unto justification and eternal life. Thus, why don't we simply have a love feast spending the whole time eating and drinking together? Why don't we simply have a baptism after the regular service (say, preach on Joshua in the OT then have a baptism afterward)? Calvin gives all we need to answer this. These are signs that point somewhere beyond themselves. Where they point is the point! To properly appreciate the sign we must view it in terms of the thing signified. Therefore, it is reasonable and proper to expound on the gospel in terms given by each sign. Thus, we explain the good news, preaching on the sacraments emphasizes certain aspects of the good news. We should not tack the sacraments on to the end of a service.

Consequently, the sacraments as gospel signs support the primacy of preaching in the gathered church. They point to the gospel and call for its exposition along certain lines (whether along the lines suggested by cleansing with water or along the lines suggested by nourishment by bread and wine).

3) Singing

Singing in the assembly is subordinate to the preached word. We are to **teach and admonish one another with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs** (Col. 3:16). What is the content of this teaching and admonishing in the gathering for worship? It will be filled with praise and thanksgiving that is guided by a rich dwelling of the word in our hearts: **Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, [as you take up] teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God**. Singing is a way of giving out the gospel message; it is a way of teaching and admonishing one another. Therefore singing is important. We should work at improving our contribution to singing and our attentiveness to the theology it teaches. It is this importance and the theology it teaches that calls for sometimes putting new words to familiar tunes, as we did for the baptism song put to the tune of "The God of Abraham Praise."

He by Himself hath sworn, this is His sacrament
 By grace set free for liberty, by His cov'nant
 In baptism now I turn, my life in sovereign hands
 to serve my king forevermore, by His commands

The baptized person makes this commitment and we all renew this commitment as we sing. We speak to our own hearts and say "awake my soul and sing of Him who died for thee." We call out to each other saying in song: "Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice, Him serve with fear, his praise forth tell, come ye before him and rejoice." We voice the Father's promise: "I will never, no never, no never forsake" the soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose.

But then why do we not simply make this the whole of worship (at least at times)? Why do we not have singing the message as another form of preaching the message? Why then do we not replace preaching with singing (to have a singing time instead of preaching)? It is simply due to the fact that singing is subordinate to and serves the preaching of the word.

Can we add anything more in reply to those who say that we can have a song service (or drama, etc.) as preaching, and thus not really in place of it? A further way to answer this question is to compare singing with reading of Scripture. Sometimes we sing Scripture and sometimes we sing scriptural teachings. When we sing Scripture, we do the reading in song. However, we may also sing scriptural teachings. In this case, singing goes beyond reading to human interpretation. Is this interpretation preaching? No, it is more like a paraphrase in the place of a translation. Both the reading of Scripture and paraphrasing Scripture in the lyrics of a song have a text that we must explain, interpret, proclaim, clarify, and apply. That is the nature and goal of *preaching*: explanation, interpretation, proclamation, clarification, and application of the gospel of Christ given in the sixty-six books of Scripture.

Thus we sing the message that we preach, and we read the message that we preach. Like the sacraments, what we sing and what we read direct our attention to the word of God that we are to clearly and boldly preach. Singing points beyond itself to preaching as primary.

2B. Second, the nature of worship supports the primacy of preaching

It is clear that preaching-teaching is an inseparable unit. When Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, He taught with authority (Matt. 5:1-2; 7:28-29). In His ministry as a preacher of the gospel of the kingdom, He gave that gospel by preaching-teaching-healing (Matt. 9:35). The healing miracles were enacted parables of restoration that embodied the message He gave in parabolic teaching and preaching. Likewise the pastor-teacher (Eph. 4:11) is to preach the word by correction, rebuke, and encouragement "**with sound doctrine**" (2 Tim. 4:1-3).

Therefore, it is easy to conclude that preaching-teaching to the assembled church is a component of worship. But how does pastoral instruction relate to worship specifically?

Consider the audience issue. Many like to stress that the gathered church must be active in song and prayer most of the time, or all of the time of the gathering, because God is the audience to our praises. That contains an important fact, namely, that God is the center and we direct all of our worship to Him. However, this way of thinking about worship, and the practice it entails, misses the critical point that *worship involves listening to the voice of God*. Remarkably, God has appointed the way to do that. We are to preach His word and listen to His word. Worship has a silent side to it. *We are silent and we listen to what God has to say*. Granted, it is through sinful and fallible ministers but nonetheless this is the way God has set things up. Therefore, on the whole when we gather, we are the audience listening to the voice of God preached by His appointed pastor-teachers.

As the assembly of called out ones, the Lord calls us to Himself. When we gather or assemble as His people, we assemble in His presence. This is a sweet and awesome place where "Christ is within the doors" and "everlasting love displays the choicest of her stores." We come into His presence with cheerful song, we give thanks, and we praise. But most of all, we bow at the feet of the Lord Jesus in silence to listen. We pay close attention (Heb.2.1) carefully and

attentively to what He has to say to us about the storehouse of kingdom truth (Mat.13.52). That in a nutshell argues the primacy of preaching.

2A Applications of the Primacy of Preaching

I can apply this message in one sentence. Because preaching has this primacy, the pastor-teacher has the duty of very *careful preparation for preaching* and the hearer has the duty of very careful and *dutiful attendance to preaching*. A Monday comment and a Saturday comment surface in this connection.

1B. This why preaching begins on Monday

I am very conscious of the importance of labor in the word to handle it accurately and wisely. It is a way that I show my love for you and for the Lord Jesus who said, "If you love me feed my lambs." I am very conscious of the fact that those who will be saved as by fire are ministers who build up the saints with wood, hay or straw instead of gold, silver and precious stones (1 Cor. 3:10-15). I will never forget the time when the Lord used this text to pierce my soul. I was in seminary preparing for gospel ministry. The text set all my work in seminary on a path of awareness and determination. I know that I shall give an account to the Lord Jesus who loved me and gave Himself for me. I know I shall give an account to Him for how I care for your souls, you who are loved by Him and saved by His death and resurrection. This is why, as a bottom line, my work of preaching on Sunday must begin on Monday (if possible) and not end until the sermon is preached. That is why I give earnest reflection on Saturday afternoon and final reflection on Sunday morning, often finishing (tweaking) the sermon an hour before we meet.

2B. This is why listening begins on Saturday

Given the awesome fact that God is present with us in the preaching of His word, then we must attend regularly and with due diligence. This is the backdrop of the call to assemble together in Hebrews 10. We must come to hear the voice of God. We speak and sing in prayer and gospel song, but then, *primarily, we come to a time of silent listening*. This is prayerful. It is an attitude. It takes adequate rest, a good nights sleep and clarity of thought. It demands attention and reflection because we seek through God appointed means to hear His voice in the gospel of Holy Scripture. This is the application of Hebrews 2.1: **Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard [and hear weekly, cf. Heb. 3.1-4.13], lest we drift away from it.**

The Saturday reference is designed to make the point that the time of preaching is so important that we prepare diligently for it knowing the amazing privilege that is ours on the Lord's Day. It is a wondrous joy. It is at the core of worship. Here we rest in silence on our Father's knee, as it were, and there we feel His embrace while He teaches us and comforts us with His promises.

For me, preaching is arduous and challenging. However, preaching and listening to preaching is privilege excelling all privileges because it is a taste of heaven here and now on earth!

Let us fall down before the majesty of God. May He bless us in living before the Lord Jesus fully aware of His Sabbath kingship. Week by week may He grant us the blessing of the Holy Spirit, joy, comfort, and peace in hearing His kind words through His appointed means of preaching. To the triune God be glory and praise, now and forevermore, amen.