

THE SERMON: PREACHING & TEACHING

By Keith Malcomson

*These articles have been written as a response to **Pagan Christianity?** a book written by Frank Viola and co-authored by George Barna. It carries the sub-title of *Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices*. All quotes are from the book.*



“Remove the sermon and you have eliminated the most important source of spiritual nourishment for countless believers (so it is thought). Yet the stunning reality is that today’s sermon has no root in scripture. Rather, it was borrowed from pagan culture, nursed and adopted into the Christian faith...the sermon actually detracts from the very purpose for which God designed the church gathering. And it has very little to do with genuine spiritual growth.” (Pg.86).

In *Pagan Christianity* the sermon is called “**Protestants most sacred cow.**” Not only do they challenge the accepted practice of preaching, teaching and the sermon as seen amongst Protestants and Evangelicals for the past 500 years but they brazenly reinterpret Old and New Testament practice in order to fit their theory with no evidence from the Scriptures whatsoever. To criticize much of so-called contemporary preaching is allowable and even commendable but to rewrite the scriptures by taking what you want and leaving what you do not want in order to create your own theology is not at all acceptable.

According to the above quotes there are few things hindering the church as much as the act of regularly preaching sermons. But scripture shows that preaching and teaching was central, regular, powerful and fruitful. In *Pagan Christianity* they first re-image true preaching then consign it to a low secondary place in the normal gathering of the local church. Is this a return to the practice of the early church or a terrible departure?

In Luke 19:47 we are told that Jesus “taught daily in the temple.” It would seem that by daily it means each day for a period of four to five days. This probably began with his purifying of the temple and continued daily until the Passover when He was taken and crucified. The response to this ministry of daily teaching was twofold: “all the people were very attentive to hear him.” (v48), “But the chief priests and the scribes and the chief of the people sought to destroy him” (v47). What was the correct response to these days of teaching by Christ? It was attentive listening to what was taught. This term used literally means to hang upon every word of a speaker, or to listen very closely. Christ’s enemies of course wanted to stop this teaching ministry by destroying Him.

With only a few days left before his departure Christ thought the ministry of teaching so vital that He continued to do it daily until the Passover meal when he again taught much to the eleven until going to Gethsemane to pray. He knew he had a short time and that teaching those who would listen must be the emphasis. The correct response to such is always attentive listening. Biblical teaching has everything to do with the purpose of God and spiritual growth. We will expand more on this in response to further quotes from *Pagan Christianity* but let’s be aware of Christ’s actual emphasis on continual teaching received by listening ears and hearts, not only during these last days of His ministry but throughout His ministry.

A number of times the authors call the act of sitting listening to a message delivered by a preacher an act of 'passivity'. Again the focus of the authors is not bad preaching but regular biblical preaching. He says "The congregation degenerates into a group of muted spectators who watch a performance...we do not grow by passive listening week by week." (Pg.97). "...how can a Christian passively sit in a pew and affirm the priesthood of all believers when he is passively sitting in a pew?" (Pg.102).

Listening to preaching or teaching is not a passive act. In response to Peter's preaching at Pentecost we are told "when they heard this" they "received his word" (2:37, 40). At Samaria: "And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake" (8:6). In Paul's ministry: "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord:" (13:48) "...heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul." (16:14).

These are only a few Scriptures but we can see that listening to preaching is not a passive act. Time and time again throughout the Word of God we see sinners and believers gathered together "listening" to preaching and teaching. While scripture notes this act and commends it, these authors belittle and mock it.

Spiritual Growth

What connection if any does preaching and teaching have to spiritual nourishment and genuine spiritual growth? It is not only vital but critical. We see in the New Testament that preaching or public proclamation by a gifted vessel is God's primary chosen means to bring people to salvation (Mk.16:15-16; Lk.24:47; Rom.10:13-15; I Cor.1:17, 18, 21). When the Greek word *kērussō* is used it denotes the activity of a town herald or a public crier. It is normally translated as preaching. If this word means anything in the Greek it means an audible, public, loud proclamation; not a discussion group, question session or general sharing. It is used to describe the activity of John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles, Philip, Paul and many others.

Such preaching in the New Testament resulted in a manifestation of God's power to open the blind eyes of sinners, in turning them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins (Acts 26:16-18). Having been saved a true believer then walks with God, and is rooted, built up and established by being taught the Word of God (Col.2:6-7). Such preaching and teaching is able to build them up and give them a full inheritance as revealed in Christ through the Word (Acts 20:32). It is by preaching that they are "established" (Rom.16:25), which means to be turned resolutely in a certain direction and to stand fast, be sure and to be strong in that direction. [That also means that preaching is not only for sinners but saints also]. It is also through the teaching of the truth and

belief of it that they obtain the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ (II Thess.2:13-15). The truth and fact of a believer's nourishment and growth through preaching and teaching of the Word of God could be greatly multiplied here.

Jesus said: "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." (Jn.17:17). And again: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (8:31-32), so we see from Christ that there is a progressive work of sanctification (of being made holy and clean) through the Word of God which will liberate and make free (Jn.15:3). While this means of sanctification is not limited to preaching and teaching it is a most vital part in it. Again Paul tells us: "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church..." (Eph.5:26-27). This work of sanctification is still going on and just as Christ's primary way to do so was preaching and teaching so Christ is still working in and through His body in this same manner (4:8-12). To diminish the place and ministry of teaching and preaching through the gifted vessels placed in the church is to diminish, restrict and disregard the ministry of Christ.

They continue further in this vein: "Let's be honest. There are scores of Christians who have been sermonized for decades, and they are still babes in Christ. We Christians are not transformed simply by hearing

sermons week after week. We are transformed by regular encounters with the Lord Jesus Christ” (Pg.99-100).

Is regular listening to sermons (preaching and teaching) from the same leaders the real cause behind many remaining babes? Although scripture most certainly points the finger at backslidden leaders and the wrong type of preaching as the cause of a bankrupt spirituality amongst God’s people, this is far from the full truth. From Genesis to Revelation we also encounter a thousand reasons why people are not affected or changed by the preaching of the Word of God. Most often the Spirit of God points the finger at some issue in the heart of man.

When Stephen preached with Holy Ghost boldness in Jerusalem the reason he was utterly rejected was that the religious hearers were “stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears” and did “always resist the Holy Ghost” (Acts 7:51). Again when Paul preached to the religious Jews in Rome many left his presence unaffected, the reason being that the “people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed” (28:27). Again writing to the believing Hebrews Paul points out that he had many things to speak to them concerning Christ but these things were hard to explain to them because they were “dull of hearing” (Heb.5:11). When he wrote to the Corinthians whom he had personally taught for one and a half years he said: “[I] could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ.” What was the reason? Was it because Paul had preached too many

sermons too frequently to them? After all a young man once fell asleep during Pauls long teachings. No, Paul gives us a clear answer: “For ye are yet carnal.” (I Cor.3:1-3)

To blame lack of spiritual growth in the church on the “sermon” is ridiculous. We need a return to biblical preaching and teaching of the 1st Century kind in every local church where hearts and issues are dealt with.

Sporadic Preaching?

Another point they raise is that regular preaching and teaching as a “normal” and “regular” part of local church life was unknown in the New Testament: “...the apostolic preaching recorded in Acts possessed the following features: it was sporadic. It was delivered on special occasions in order to deal with specific problems. It was extemporaneous and without rhetorical structure” (Pg.88). “Note that the New Testament presents to us different kinds of meetings. Some meetings are characterized by a central speaker like an apostle or evangelist preaching to an audience. But these kinds of meetings were sporadic and temporary in nature. They weren’t the ordinary, normative meeting of first-century believers” (pg.59 note 68).

For the first several years of the church in Jerusalem the preaching and teaching was performed exclusively by the apostles and was almost the exclusive mark of their gatherings. We have no pattern or example in Jerusalem of local gatherings of the church lacking preaching or

teaching in the temple or in the homes. This was performed by the same group of twelve men to the same people in the same places for several years (4:2, 18; 5:21, 25, 42). This was far from being “sporadic” neither were these messages just for the purpose of dealing with “specific problems.” The first believers in this first church would consider continued regular preaching and teaching from the same men as normative.

This ministry of constant daily preaching and teaching to a ‘listening’ people was the means in God’s hands to raise up the first church. It was the means of preparing a great host of mature men and woman who would be greatly used of God and who were known for their Christian character.

The same can be said with the first great Gentile Church at Antioch: “And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch” (Act 11:26). Here we see two men, Barnabas and Saul, gathering with this church and the main activity of their gatherings was teaching. Please note that they were not apostles. Barnabas was gifted as a prophet and Saul as a teacher (4:36; I Tim.2:7; II Tim.1:11). By chapter 13:1 we have a unique insight to the local eldership of a local church when their names, number and gifting are mentioned. Again after their first missionary trip as apostles we are told: “Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also” (Act 15:35). It is very evident that preaching and teaching was

a normal and regular part in the gathering of this church over the period of its first several years. Note that it says “many others” taught and preached “also.” Not all the church but some. This was the normal practice of the local gifted leaders in Antioch not the activity of all the members or the special temporary activity of apostles.

In Acts 18:11, we are informed concerning Paul’s ministry at Corinth: “And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the Word of God among them.” Again this was not sporadic. These Greek believers would consider regular teaching in the gathering of the assembly as normative.

When Paul came to Ephesus we read of his ministry: “...disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus. And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (19:9-10). Again we read further about his time at Ephesus: “I...taught you publickly, and from house to house, Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ...by the space of three years” (20:20-21). Here we see Paul teaching publically and privately on a daily basis for at least two years. Once again teaching is seen as the primary activity and reason for gathering the church. This was not sporadic or occasional at all.

“There is no indication that Old Testament prophets or priests gave regular speeches to God’s people. Instead, the nature of Old Testament preaching was sporadic,

fluid, and open for audience participation. Preaching in the ancient synagogue followed a similar pattern.” (Pg.87). In other words it was sporadic, not regular. Yet in the footnote just below this statement they quote: “The only difference in synagogue preaching is that a message delivered on a biblical text was a regular occurrence” (Pg.87). Do they realise that they have just contradicted themselves here?

“For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.” (Act 15:21; 13:27). From this scripture we see that it was the regular custom in the synagogue not only to read the scriptures but to preach them, which was to herald and proclaim them aloud. Again we could expand much on this theme from the Old Testament but we are working hard to keep these articles brief, to the point and simple.

“...the contemporary evangelical preaching tradition finds its most recent roots in the Puritan movement...the Puritans centered all their church services around systematic teaching of the Bible...the Puritans centered all of their church services around highly structured, methodical, logical verse-by-verse exposition of scripture...ironically, ‘the Book’ knows nothing of this type of sermon” (Pg.95-96).

A good biblical example of the type of teaching which they say cannot be found in the Bible was given by Ezra: “So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the

reading.” (Neh.8:8). Here we have a prime example. First he reads God’s Word “distinctly.” This means to separate it, open it up, or to expand and expound it. Then he “gave the sense.” This means intelligence or to give it personal meaning and application. Lastly he “caused them to understand” the reading. While the authors also make little of the hour long (or hour and half) sermon of the Puritans we see here that Ezra lead a meeting for the exposition of the scriptures which lasted six hours with children in attendance as well.

Again much could be said to show that the Puritans and many other movements and leaders within Evangelical circles over the past five hundred years desired to follow the example and instruction of Scripture alone in the manner they followed in their teaching and preaching (Mk.4:34; Lk.24:27, 44; Acts 18:26; Jn.5:39). Just as Jesus and the apostles quoted frequently from the Old Testament Scripture and desired to open such up to the understanding of the listeners so did the Puritans likewise (Mt.19:4; 21:42; Mk.12:10, 26; 2:25; 13:14)

In Luke 4 we are told that it was Christ’s custom to be found in the synagogue on the Sabbath day in Nazareth (v16). It was here that He preached His first sermon. Upon this occasion when he stood to read he was given the Book of Isaiah. He opened the book and found his text. After reading it he closed it, handed it back and sat down. “And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” (v21). He then went on to preach unto them. In response we are told that “all” those in the synagogue when they “heard” these things

were “filled with wrath” (v28). As a result they rose up, put him out of the city and attempted to cast him over the brow of a hill (v29). After escaping by walking through the midst of them He “came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and taught them on the sabbath days.” By this method word of His ministry spread into the whole surrounding region.

In this chapter we see that Christ’s ministry of teaching was marked by people listening; not dialogue. And just because “all” in his home synagogue rejected such preaching does not mean the fault was with the messenger, the message or the method.

In Acts 8 we see Phillip led of the Holy Ghost to join himself to the chariot of the Ethiopian Eunuch. Once invited into the chariot to explain what he had been reading from Isaiah 53 we are told that: “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus” (v35). How did he preach Christ? He preached from the Word of God starting at a text of scripture and then opening up the whole context and meaning.

Open-participatory Meetings

One last major area we must deal with under this heading is concerning open-participatory meetings replacing biblical preaching and teaching. “Active participation and interruption by the audience were common...there is no indication that Old Testament prophets or priests gave regular speeches to God’s people. Instead, the nature of

Old Testament preaching was sporadic, fluid, and open for audience participation.” (Pg.87). “...most synagogues allowed for any member to preach to the people who wished to do so.”

They quote one author as saying: “The original proclamation of the Christian message was a two-way conversation...oratory tended to take the place of conversation.” (Pg.92) Describing the apostolic preaching in the Book of Acts they say: “It was most often dialogical (meaning it included feedback and interruptions from the audience) rather than monological (a one-way discourse).” (Pg.88). “This ‘every-member’ functioning was also conversational (I Cor.14:29) and marked by interruptions (14:30).” (Pg.88)

First it is very obvious that in the Old Testament, public ministry, teaching and preaching was limited, restricted and reserved to the few; not all. Presuming and assuming that the gatherings in the Old Testament portray ‘open audience participation’ and that ‘any and all taught’ is mere fiction with no biblical evidence.

Also to attempt to reconstruct the terms ‘preach’ and ‘teach’ to mean ‘dialogue by all’ and to state that such was marked by interruptions is yet another man-made myth. There was most certainly a place for questions within the teaching ministry as seen in the New Testament, but this was not the dominant or all pervading mark. Biblical teaching and preaching often results in questions, but is not dominated or demanded by it or necessary for it.

In the above quotes the only scriptures given to backup or verify this theory are taken from I Corinthians 14. They state that verse 29 verifies that the ministry in the local church by the whole body was “conversational.” In verse 30 they state that the typical gathering and teaching was “marked” by interruptions. This could not be further from the truth. The context of the surrounding verses concerns the public operation of prophecy and specifically the ministry in the local church of the prophet. It has nothing to do with conversational discussion or questions in a relaxed atmosphere. To say such is to utterly misinterpret these scriptures.

Both verses specifically deal with the ministry of the prophet and as stated in 12:28-29 only “some” in the local church are prophets. So these scriptures are restricted to a few at Corinth. Not only that, the teaching in these verses restricts ministry in a gathering to two or three prophets although this could be interpreted as two or three prophesies from the prophets. It is clear that Paul the apostle is not talking about public conversation or a question time here. It is prophetic ministry given by the Holy Spirit through human vessels. In verse 31, which is still in the context of the ministry of the prophets, we are told that in this manner “that all may learn.” So in reality we have some prophesying and all listening and learning in these verses. That is a long cry from what is stated by Viola and Barna in *Pagan Christianity*.

Do we see normal public ministry being interrupted by questions at Corinth or in other early church gatherings? No. In fact we see the opposite. In Chapter 12:33-35 it is commonly and consistently believed that Paul was speaking concerning woman who were asking their husbands questions about the teaching, during the teaching. Paul's response was that if these married women were to learn and be taught anything they ought to wait until getting home to ask their husbands questions and not disturb the gathering. Paul does not suggest that they direct their questions in the gathering to the one teaching and preaching or as an open consultation to the whole body. There is no restriction placed on woman praying or prophesying in the open gathering (11:5; Acts 2:17; 21:9) but a restriction is placed upon asking their husband questions in the meeting when they should do it at home after the meeting.

In chapters 12-14 of I Corinthians we do not have teaching about open dialogue, discussion or questions; we have teaching primarily on the vocal gifts of the nine supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit. In other words not dialogue from every member, but gifts operating through every member. In 12:7-12 we are taught that the Holy Spirit does indeed shine forth and make His presence felt in the local gathering through each member of the body. He then gives us nine distinct gifts which can operate through members of the body. This is true body ministry. This public ministry is open to every member but is subject to the will of the Spirit (12:11; Rom.12:6; Heb.2:4).

In 1Cor.14:26 we are instructed: "...when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying." This one scripture cannot be taken out of the context of the whole teaching of these chapters. Neither can it be magnified out of all proportion and made the dominating central mark of the regular church gathering. The statements in this verse do not override other teachings concerning "gathering together." Neither must we exclude this verse as irrelevant in the local gathering. This scripture certainly reveals an open-participatory meeting but it also shows that each gathering will have a doctrine. A "doctrine" is a teaching. Nowhere in these gatherings do we see local gatherings without a teaching of doctrine or an opening of God's Word.

Can anyone give forth such doctrine? No absolutely not. Can just anyone within a gathering give a message in tongues? No they must be gifted to do so by the Spirit according to His will and operate it according to other teaching in these chapters. Can just anyone give a revelation or interpretation? No. The same is true for giving forth doctrine in the public gathering. A man must be gifted or qualified to do so and must do so according to the teaching of Scripture. In ch.12:28-29 we are clearly taught that "some" are specifically and deliberately set in the body to teach. "Are all Teachers?" The answer of course is no. Every member is not called, gifted, or able to teach the local body.

Although the authors acknowledge that “the gift of teaching is present in the church” they go on to qualify this by stating that it will not “take the form of a conventional sermon” (Pg.100). In their end notes they comment further on the sporadic nature of preaching and teaching within the local gathering. They attempt to limit Paul’s command to Timothy to “Preach the word” (I Tim.4:2) to “an apostolic worker” and to “the apostolic call” of Paul, Timothy and others while the “normative” regular gathering of the church has every member sharing and allowed to preach and teach (pg.102-3). After doing away with a local preacher or teacher they replace it with “mutual exhortation and mutual ministry” and go on to say that: “the New Testament hinges spiritual transformation on these two things.” (Pg.100).

Such teaching removes the ministry of God’s Word from local godly elders who have been gifted as prophets, teachers or shepherds and locks it up as the sole right of the apostolic ministry. At the same time such teaching emphasis a false open-participatory meeting nowhere taught in the New Testament in place of gifted teachers and preachers. In Scripture little is said, taught or shown of this open participatory meeting spoken of by Viola and Barna but an awful lot is revealed in actions and teaching about the public preaching and teaching of the Word by chosen gifted local men in the local church gathering.

“For those of us who regard the sermon to be exotically boring, we understand the feeling of being ‘preached to death.’” (Pg.98 footnote 79). This reveals the authors

personal intimate feelings about the sermon or act of preaching. He is not criticising bad preaching, he is criticising sermons themselves. The sermon is “exotically boring.” That is the very reason they are attempting to do away with them and not because it has been proven to be an unscriptural pagan practice.

