

A Biblical Model For Preaching The Word of God Nehemiah 8:1-12

Intro. 1) George Barna hit evangelicals between the eyes in December 2003 when he reported that “only 4% of adults [in America] have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision making.” That observation, though sobering, was not shocking. However, it was his next discovery that really got our attention: “Only 9% of born again Christians have [a basic, biblical worldview].” (*Barna Update*, December 2003). What did he mean by a biblical worldview?

“For the purposes of the research, a biblical worldview was defined as believing that absolute moral truths exist; that such truth is defined by the Bible; and firm belief in six specific religious views. Those view were that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life; God is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe and He still rules it today; salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned; Satan is real; a Christian has a responsibility to share their faith in Christ with other people; and the Bible is accurate in all of its teachings.” (Barna, Dec. 2003)

2) Boston College Professor Stephen Prothero helps put this in stark perspective when writing for the *Los Angeles Times* he writes:

The sociologist Peter Berger once remarked that if India is the most religious country in the world and Sweden the least, then the United States is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. Not anymore. With a Jesus lover in the Oval Office and the faith-based party in control of both houses of Congress, the United States is undeniably a nation of believers ruled by the same.

Things are different in Europe, and not just in Sweden. The Dutch are four more times less likely than Americans to believe in miracles, hell and biblical inerrancy. The euro does not trust in God. But here is the paradox: Although Americans are far more religious than Europeans, they know far less about religion...

In Europe, religious education is the rule from the elementary grades on. So Austrians, Norwegians and the Irish can tell you about the Seven Deadly Sins or the Five Pillars of Islam. But, according to a 1997 poll, only one out of three U.S. citizens is able to name the most basic of Christian texts, the four Gospels, and 12% think Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. That paints a picture of a nation that believes God speaks in Scripture but that can't be bothered to read what he has to say...

When Americans debated slavery, almost exclusively on the basis of the Bible, people of all races and classes could follow the debate. They could make sense of its references to the runaway slave in the New Testament book of Philemon and to the year of jubilee, when slaves could be freed, in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Today it is a rare American who can engage with any sophistication in biblically inflected arguments about gay marriage, abortion or stem cell research...

How did this happen? How did one of the most religious countries in the world become a nation of religious illiterates? Religious congregations are surely at fault. Churches and synagogues that once inculcated the "fourth R" are now telling the faithful stories "ripped from the headlines" rather than teaching them

the Ten Commandments or parsing the Sermon on the Mount (which was delivered, as only one in three Americans can tell you, by Jesus). But most of the fault lies in our elementary and secondary schools. (Stephen Prothero, “A Nation of Faith and Religious Illiterates,” *latimes.com* (1-12-05).)

I take issue only with Prothero’s last statement. The fault lies not with the schools but with the churches and, in particular, the pulpits. Walt Kaiser is exactly correct when he says, “One of the most depressing spectacles in the church today is her lack of power....At the heart of this problem is an impotent pulpit.” (p.235-36). Seduced by the sirens of modernity we have jettisoned a word-based ministry that is expository in nature. We have, in our attempt to be popular and relevant, become foolish and irrelevant.

Skiing across the surface needs of a fallen, sinful humanity we have turned the pulpit into a pop-psychology side-show and a feel-good pitstop. We have neglected preaching the whole counsel of God’s Word and the theology of God’s Word. Too many of our people know neither the content of Scripture or the doctrines of Scripture. Preaching the cross of Christ and the bloody atonement accomplished by His death is the exception rather than the norm. Some choose to focus on politics, others the emotions, still others relationships and the list goes on and on. If the Bible is used at all, it is usually as a proof-text out of context with no real connection to what the speaker is saying.

3) And in August 2005 a study was released that said only “one in six adults make moral decisions based on the content of the Bible,” with close to 50% making their moral choices “on the basis of specific principles or standard’s they believe in.” The survey revealed, “Most born-again Christians hold a confusing and inherently contradictory set of religious beliefs that go unchecked by the leaders of their faith community...[indeed]

churches base their sense of success on indications such as attendance, congregant satisfaction, dollars raised and built-out square footage. None of those factors,” it was noted, “relates to the kind of radical shift in thinking and behavior that Jesus died on the cross to facilitate.” (*RNS*, Aug, 2005, Barne Report).

4) The words of the prophet Amos were never more piercing, “Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord GOD, “That I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine of bread, Nor a thirst for water, But of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, And from north to east; They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, But shall not find it.” Ours is a day when people are more familiar with the characters of Star Wars, Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings than they are the men and women of Scripture.

5) However, our day is not unique. There have been other times when there was a famine in the land concerning the Word of God, and one of those times was in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra. And yet here in the 8th chapter, we see a return to the Holy Scriptures, a return, verse 1 tells us was, initiated by the people. In an event we could describe as a “Bible Revival,” a pattern for how we preach the Scripture appears before us. The text before us is descriptive not prescriptive. Still what we see is worthy of our careful study and also for our consideration for how we handle the Word of God. In Nehemiah 8:1-12 we discover 4 essential elements that should be present each and every time the Word of God is proclaimed. The gravity of this assignment is put well by D.A. Carson who writes:

“Make a mistake in the interpretation of one of Shakespeare’s plays, falsely scan a

piece of Spenserian verse, and there is unlikely to be an entailment of eternal consequences; but we cannot lightly accept the same laxity in the interpretation of the Scripture. We are dealing with God's thoughts: we are obligated to take the greatest pains to understand them truly and to explain them clearly" (p 15).

Trans. Note with me first:

I. Preaching Should Draw Us Together To Hear the Man of God 8:1

- If Chapter 8 is chronologically subsequent to chapters 1-7, and I believe it is, the people of God have come thru a triumphant but traumatic time. Against great opposition the wall of the city has been rebuilt. The nation is now well-organized, well-equipped, well-defended, and well governed.
- Still, there is something missing. A spiritual dryness has spread across the land, a dryness so great that the people themselves sense the urgency of the situation.
- They gather on the 7th month (7:73). The first day was the Feast of Trumpets, later celebrated as the New year. The 10th day was the Day of Atonement, the 15th day the Feast of Tabernacles began. The time was right for a renewing of their covenant with God. The time was right for a return to the Word of God.

1) We Should Gather To Hear God's Servant

- All the people gathered...People occurs 13 times in 8:1-12, all the people 9 of those 13 times.
- Gathered as one man tells us they were unified, focused and ready with anticipation.

- Called for Ezra, the man of God, the scribe. Ezra arrived in 458 B.C. and has been off or behind the scene for 13 years (the date is now 445-444 B.C.). Being busy with many good things, the nation had neglected the best thing, the essential thing, the careful exposition of Holy Scripture.
- Now they call for a man they trust, a man of the Scriptures, a man of God. Ezra we are told, is such a man, for in Ezra 7:10 the Bible says, “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.”

2) We Should Gather To Hear The Holy Scriptures

- The people asked for one thing and only one thing: the Book of the Law of Moses, the Torah, the Word of God.
- J.I. Packer, noting the biblical and theological vitality of the Puritans writes, “The Puritans insisted that the preacher’s task is to feed their congregations with the contents of the Bible – not the dry husks of their own fancy, but the life-giving words of God. Better not preach at all, they would tell us, than preach beyond the Bible, or without utter and obvious confidence in the quickening, nourishing power of the biblical message.”
- Walter Liefeld adds, “Good expository preaching does not impress the congregation; it feeds them (p. 9). We must feed our people a steady diet of Bible.

II. Preaching Should Help Us To Understand The Word of God 8:2-3, 5, 8

- It is interesting to note who gathered for the teaching of the Word: “Men, and women and all who could hear with understanding.” Apparently the youth and

older children were not whisked away for Children’s Church” or “Solid Rock.”

God sees the benefit of the family coming together for worship and instruction.

1) We Must Read the Word of God 8:2-3, 8

- Vs. 2: “all who could hear”
- Vs. 3: “then he read...and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the Law (6x in 8:1-12)
- Vs. 8: “So they read distinctly from the book, in the law of God.”
- It is a sin to read the Bible poorly!

Read it accurately

Read it clearly

Read it passionately

Read it respectfully

2) We Must Listen To The Word of God 8:3

- This verse is remarkable. For 5-6 hours the people stood (v.5) and they listened. Why? Because this was the Word of God and they were hungry for it, desperate for it. Commenting on these verses in Nehemiah, Bryan Chapell notes: “Here the exposition of the Word involved three elements: presentation of the Word (it was read); explanation of the Word (making it clear and giving its meaning); and exhortation based on the Word (the Hebrew terms indicate the priests caused the people to understand in such a way that they could use the information that was imparted). The Word itself, explanation of its content, and exhortation to apply its truths composed the pattern of proclamation.” (80-81)

- They did not listen to the reading of a chopped-down, dumbed-down, user-friendly *100 Minute Bible* so they might, as publisher Len Budd said, “answer pub quiz questions on the Bible. (9-22-05) They listened long and they listened with intensity.

3) We Must Honor the Word of God 8:4-5

- For 5-6 hours the people stood as the Word of God was read and explained. Ezra stood above them on a platform (vs 4-5), symbolically lifting the Bible above them as their authority, their guide. Al Mohler has well said, “The purpose of preaching is not that we ourselves might be heard, but that the text of the Word of God might be heard.” (*Preaching : The Centrality of Scripture*, 11). This truth unavoidably drives us to the issue of authority in our lives.
- Ultimately there are 4 basic sources of authority in life:
A) Reason B) Experience C) Tradition D) Revelation
Scripture must be preeminent in all cases.

4) We Must Explain the Word of God 8:8

- Here is the key verse of our text. Three things are emphasized.
 1. Ezra and those with him read distinctly (*NIV*, “making it clear”)
 2. They gave the sense (*NIV*, “giving the meaning”)
 3. They helped them understand the reading (Understanding is emphasized in vs. 2, 3, 7, 8, 12).

This is not the model of many teachers of modern and post-modern homiletics, a model that for many says: “The preacher and congregation

gather symbolically at a round table where there is no head and no foot, where labels like clergy and laity blur, and where believing or wanting to believe is all that matters. Here the preacher is neither the expert in scriptural interpretation nor the answer person in matters of faith. Here the preacher is simply the one charged with the responsibility of focusing homiletical conversation for the particular service worship. Although one person *may* do all the speaking during the time set aside for the sermon, it is the priesthood of believers, the entire community of faith, that is responsible for exploring the Word and deciding its meanings, its claims, its direction pointings.” Lucy Rose, “Conversational Preaching: A Proposal,” *Journal for Preachers* 19 (1995): 26-30.

- Because of the captivity, many in the audience may have needed the Scriptures translated from Hebrew into Aramic, interpreted and explained. The thrust of the text is clear. Ezra and his companions expounded the Word of God helping the people understand the Scriptures and their implications for doctrine and practice, for belief and behavior. Bottom line: they carried out the assignment of expository preaching not community conversation.
- J.I. Packer says:
“The true idea of expository preaching is that the preacher should become the mouthpiece of his text, opening it up and applying it as the Word of God to his hearers, speaking in order that the text may be heard, and making each point from his text in such a manner that his hearers may discern the voice of God.”

- Steven Olford would add to this: “Whether we are facing an individual, a study group, or a Sunday morning congregation, our handling of the Word of God should be expository, if it is to be authentic in the Biblical sense. I am aware, of course, that homiletics maintain that there are other ways to preaching a sermon, but I argue that for an utterance to be truly scriptural it must derive from sound exegesis and exposition.”
- John Broadus lamented the absence of careful exposition in his own day when he wrote, “It is a mournful fact that the Universalists, Romanists, Mormons, can find apparent support for their heresies in Scripture, without interpreting more loosely, without doing greater violence to the meaning and connection of the Sacred Text than is sometimes done by orthodox, devout, and even intelligent men.” (p.47)
- I would submit that how we preach and teach the Bible should model for our people how they handle the Word of God. If all the teachers in your church taught as you teach, would that really be a good thing? Many who claim to be expositors are not expositors!

III. Preaching Should Move Us to Worship The God of the Word 8:6

- Derek Kidner points out that vs 6-8, “rule out any thought of bibliolatry” (p. 106) The purpose of preaching is to never be the mere impartation of knowledge (1 Cor 8:11) Must there be a knowledge component, a content component in preaching? Absolutely! There must also be an action component, a call to act as well.

- Two questions must always be raised and answered when we preach: 1) What do I want my people to know? 2) What do I want my people to do? In the context of worship, we see 2 very appropriate responses in our text.

1) We Should Bless the Lord with Our Voice

- Ezra blessed (NIV, “*praised*”) Yahweh, the God the great.
- The people responded with their voice as well shouting, “Amen. Amen!” It is firm, established, we assent, we agree. The repetition is for emphasis and reveals the intensity of their heart and affection for God. However, they did not stop here in their worship.

2) We Should Bow Before the Lord with Our Face

- While shouting “amen, amen,” they lifted their hands in adoration, and bowed their heads and put their faces to the ground in humiliation.
- Why? Because they were worshipping the Lord (2X). They were, by the ministry of the Word, in the presence of the great God.
- This God is not our cheerleader, our therapist, our buddy. This God is not user-friendly, a puppet on a string, or a hand-wrenching, nervous and anxiety filled deity wondering what will happen next and fearful; that he is not up to the task. No, this is a great and awesome God who inspires the most humble form of worship. Stephen Davey is dead center when he writes, “*Ezra praised God for who God was- the great, the awesome, the sovereign God.*”
There is no revival if you have a little god; a puny god who can be coerced and bribed; a petty god who, like some divine genie, exists to do your will and fulfill your every wish; an understandable god who is not majestic or

transcendent; a weak god who can barely keep up with his own creation.

Rather, revival comes to the hearts of those who encounter the Triune God in all His splendor, holiness, and might.

IV. Preaching Should Inspire Us to Rejoice in the God Who is Holy 8:9-12

- I am not a fan of Joel Osteen’s preaching or his theology. However, there is something all of us can learn from him, and it is probably the reason he is so popular. It is the power and human longing for hope. As he said in a recent interview with *U.S. News and World Report*, I think that my message is just very positive and hopeful, and I think people are looking for that... We try to make [our services] a celebration” (10-3-05). Now, there is a false kind of hope and a true kind of hope. The false kind of hope has no gospel, neglects conviction of sin, and potentially and tragically will send many to hell with a smile on their face. True hope is rooted in conviction, but will always result in celebration, the joy of the Lord who is our strength.

1) Preaching Should Bring Conviction 8:9

- Broadus wisely points out, “Many persons shrink from the idea of exciting emotions...But while ignorant people often value too highly, or rather too exclusively, the appeal to their feelings, cultivated people are apt to shrink from such appeals quite too much Nevertheless, our feelings about religion are habitually too cold- who can deny it? And any genuine excitement is greatly desirable. Inspired teachers have evidently acted on this principle. Our Lord and the apostles tried not merely to convince their hearers

but to incite them to earnest corresponding action, and their language is often surcharged with emotion.”(p. 174)

- The powerful proclamation of the Word of God will bring people to conviction and repentance. That this was the result cannot be doubted as they were reduced to weeping and mourning as they “heard the words of the Law.” The renewal of their commitment to God and His covenant was indeed “a day holy to the Lord.” It was also a day of grief and sorrow, a day of brokenness and sadness. John Piper teaches us, “No one cries over missing what they don’t want to have.” Israel wanted God, His love, His grace, His forgiveness, His essence.
- Preaching that is only positive, happy and filled with “how to plans of action” will not provide a balanced biblical diet and a healthy, theological lifestyle. Much like cotton candy, it will look good and taste good, but there is no substance and no nutrition. As Hershael York well says, “ If some preachers choke their people to death on spiritual meat, other preachers starve their congregation on cotton candy.” (p.14) Engaging exposition with a dual focus on theology and application will avoid this dangerous homiletically malady.
- No, we must preach all of the Bible, and conviction of sin will be a necessary and healthy response to its truth. Such preaching will bring tears, but it will bring healing to both spiritual indifference and spiritual arrogance.

2) Preaching Should Bring Celebration 8:10-12

- Yamachi well says, “The powerful exposition of the Word of God can [will] bring deep conviction of sin. But, repentance must not degenerate into a self-centered remorse but must issue into joy in God’s forgiving goodness (2 Cor. 2:5-11)” (p.725) The people are to move forward and into action out of an assurance of God’s gracious forgiveness. They are to eat the best (lit. “the fat”) and drink the best (the sweetest). They are also commanded to share with the poor, with those less fortunate and who have nothing. The grace of God in their lives should move them to be channels of grace to others.
- In all of this they should remember the uniqueness of the day and not sorrow. Why? Because the joy of the Lord, grounded in God’s goodness and forgiveness, is our strength, it will sustain us.
- The people are told not to mourn (v.9), weep (v.9), sorrow (v.10), or grieve (v.11). Rather they are to reflect on this holy day (v. 9,10,11), eat, drink, rejoice and share with others the blessings they have received from the Lord! How did this happen? What brought about this glorious transformation? Verse 12 concludes with the answer: “because they understood the words that were declared to them.”

Conclusion

- John Broadus, the first professor of homiletics at SBTS said, “To master the Bible is the work of a lifetime, and no haphazard study will ever accomplish it.” (p.294). “To interpret and apply his text according to its real meaning is one of the preacher’s most sacred duties.” (p.24) “When a man who is apt in teaching, whose soul is on fire with the truth which he trusts has saved him

and hopes will save others, speaks to his fellow-men, face to face, eye to eye, and electric sympathies flash to and fro between him and his hearers, till they lift each other up, higher and higher, into the intensest thought, and the most impassioned emotion- higher and yet higher, till they are borne as on chariots of fire above the world, --there is a power to move men, to influence character, life, destiny, such as no printed page, radio cabinet, or silver screen can ever possess.” (p.3)

- One cannot love the God of the Book without a love for the book of God. Let us read it, explain it, and obey it for as John Stott has well said, “For Christianity is, in its very essence, a religion of the Word of God.” (*Two Worlds*, 15).