

**PREPARED TO
PREACH**

This short book contains a wealth of powerful and practical wisdom for the preacher. Whether you are an occasional preacher, an experienced pastor-teacher, or working through a growing sense of calling to preach, you will find this book extremely helpful. The key note that Scharf strikes throughout is preparation: first the preparation of the preacher, and second, the preparation of the message. This right biblical balance is a timely reminder of the seriousness of the task. Preaching is not mere explanation – it is proclamation of the living and enduring Word of God. In the detailed chapters on preparing the message Scharf excels. His careful and logical approach will surely result in better preaching – there is no higher commendation for a book on preaching.

Rev Dr Robin Sydserff
Director of Ministry, The Proclamation Trust

PREPARED TO PREACH

GOD'S WORK & OURS IN PROCLAIMING HIS WORD

GREG SCHARF

MENTOR

Greg Scharf studied biology at Rice University where he came to realize he was a sinner and turned to Jesus as his Savior. He earned M.Div. and D.Min. degrees from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where God convinced him of the key role of the local church in His eternal plan.

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Greg and Ruth have three sons, two daughters-in-law, and one granddaughter.

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Preface

This book will be more helpful to you if your expectations of it correspond to those of its author. As I write, I have in mind a reader who is already motivated to learn to preach, who perhaps has done some preaching, and who has been challenged to preach or feels a growing compulsion to do so. I am assuming that your time is limited because preaching is not the only thing you do. You may indeed be a pastor-teacher, or aspire to that role, but I write also for the parachurch worker who speaks from the Bible to students, the short-term missionary who anticipates being asked to preach, the layperson who is occasionally asked to preach or who wants to be able to give a clear devotional message or Bible talk, and the student who wants to grasp the basics of preaching. Many books have been written about preaching that go into more depth than this one and are written by people whose training and experience equip them to consider various angles of preaching. I will recommend a number of these books as we go along. I am indebted to their authors for virtually all the ideas you will find here.¹ You may have already read some of these books; if so, this exercise will be a review. Since most who pick up this little book won't have read other books on preaching, I won't assume that you use the jargon, or care about the technical matters that concern homileticians (those who study preaching). Instead, I attempt to lay out in a few words how you can prepare to preach.

¹Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); and Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) have been especially formative. Lloyd Perry, John Stott, and Michael Bullmore taught me a great deal in classes, and John Stott also did so by example for the years I served at All Souls in London.

I hope you won't use this book merely as a 'how-to' manual, offering a list of tips, things you can *do* in order to preach. That would be a misguided understanding of preaching and would grant to the preacher entirely too much prominence in the process. There are indeed a number of things you, the preacher, must do, but these are not at the heart of preaching. It is what God does that is at the heart of preaching.

My prayer is that these words will be used by the Triune God to assist in equipping preachers whose messages are faithful to Scripture, clearly expressed (and therefore understandable), sensitive to the situation, and anointed by the Holy Spirit. When God's people hear his voice and obey, the church will be built up, God will be glorified, and the powers in the heavenly realms will marvel at his multifaceted wisdom that he could stoop to use people like us to make a name for himself (Eph. 3:10).

I am grateful to the Regents of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for allowing me a sabbatical in the spring of 2004 to work on this project and especially to colleagues Don Carson, Steve Roy, Mike Bullmore, Gene Swanstrom, Dana Harris, and Ken Langley for their valuable feedback and candid suggestions, many of which I was able to implement. Several students read a draft of the manuscript. Among them, Jonathan Menn's detailed critique was especially helpful. I appreciated Dr. Kent Hughes, my pastor, Colin Smith and David Jackman for taking time to read the manuscript and offer encouragement. My son Graham helped with some computing issues and made valuable comments on the manuscript, and the whole family offered timely encouragement although my wife Ruth is, as always, peerless in that respect. Naturally, despite all the helpful suggestions, I take responsibility for the final product. To these people, and those who pray for me regularly or occasionally, and to the One to whom they pray, I express my sincere thanks.

Part One

Preparing to Prepare

1

What Is Preaching?

If we begin by assuming that preaching is merely what preachers do, we will almost certainly distort the preparation process. We will be tempted to work only on the knowledge, attitudes, and skills we as preachers need in order to preach. Instead, let us recall some basic assertions of Scripture that will point us in another direction.¹

God speaks. Sometimes he speaks directly. As early as Genesis 1:3, even before humans were present, God spoke and there was light. When God speaks, he speaks clearly, truly, purposefully, authoritatively, and sufficiently. He speaks to be heard. He speaks to be obeyed.

God also speaks through means. Not all of his speech thunders directly from heaven. God speaks, for instance, through creation (Ps. 19:1-4). God speaks through his messengers, angels (Luke 2:10-12). God speaks through prophets who are, as it were, his *mouth*, as Aaron was to Moses (Exod. 7:1-2). Ultimately, God speaks through his Son, the exact representation of his being (Heb. 1:1-3). His speaking through these means does not diminish his word in any way. It is to be heeded, even though it is mediated.

God spoke his *written* word. He breathed out the whole of Scripture, the sixty-six canonical books of the Old and New Testaments (2 Tim. 3:16-17). As a result, men ‘spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Pet. 1:20-21). Yet the Bible is not merely the product of this process, nor simply a deposit of truth, though it is certainly that. ‘The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any two-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart’ (Heb. 4:12).

¹See Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1996) and *Hearing God's Words: Exploring Biblical Spirituality* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) for a fuller development of these ideas.

God still speaks through his written word. He speaks through us when we speak from his written word in his name and by his power. Paul and his coworkers were deeply encouraged when they preached to the Thessalonians that the gospel came to their listeners not merely as words but with power, the Holy Spirit, and deep conviction so that the gospel in turn went forth from them (1 Thess. 1:4-8). They thanked God, saying ‘when you [Thessalonians] received the word of God, *which you heard from us*, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God which is at work in you who believe’ (1 Thess. 2:13). Additionally, ‘If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God’ (1 Pet. 4:11). The word *should* in 1 Peter 4:11 and the apostolic elation over the Thessalonians imply that those who speak sometimes fail to speak as oracles of God and their listeners do not always receive what they say as what it actually is, the word of God. So our understanding of preaching will necessarily be an ideal, a goal toward which we strive.

Instead, then, of thinking of preaching as what we do with God’s word, we are wiser to think of it as what God does with his word through us.² After all, Paul could write that ‘Scripture ... preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham’ (Gal. 3:8 *ESV*). So how do we define ‘preaching’? John Stott captures the essence of it: ‘To preach is to open up the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God’s voice is heard and God’s people obey.’³ We preach the Word when our messages have the right source, the right content, the right immediate purpose, and the right ultimate goal.

Our *source* is the Word of God to which every message is faithful. The preacher expounds a text, a unit of thought from the Bible, or some appropriate collection of biblical texts. The Bible in its various parts and as a whole sets our agenda. Its literary genres

²J. I. Packer says, ‘Christian preaching is the event of God himself bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction through the words of a spokesperson.’ *Preaching the Living Word: Addresses from the Evangelical Ministry Assembly* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor/Christian Focus Publications, 1999), 28.

³Personal conversation, February, 2003.

shape our messages, its tone sets our tone, its truths are what we preach, its authority gives us boldness, and its permanence gives us relevance in every age. Peter captures it well when he describes the Bible as the enduring word of God, the word of the Lord which stands forever. ‘And this is the word that was preached to you’ (1 Pet. 1:23-25).

Our sermon’s *content* is truth from God that the Bible teaches. Whether it is sound doctrine to believe, an example to follow or avoid, a command to obey, or a warning to heed, the subject of the sermon corresponds with the subject that the passage addresses. These are the things we ‘teach and urge’ (see 1 Tim. 6:3).

Our *immediate purposes* in preaching are in keeping with the purposes of our text in its context. Ultimately every part of the Bible points to Christ (Luke 24:25-27), and was given to make us wise for salvation through faith in him (2 Tim. 3:15). All Jesus taught his apostles is written so that we may use it to make disciples who obey all his commands (Matt. 28:20). But not all texts are commands. A passage may play another role. It may be designed by the Holy Spirit to encourage, instruct, or rebuke, for instance. The preacher discovers that role and urges listeners to respond in ways consonant with it.

The *ultimate goal* of our preaching is the glory of God. God is pleased and glorified when our listeners receive the Word of God for what it is and respond in faith, hope, and love as the Thessalonians did. Such a hearing is possible only when the Holy Spirit opens blind eyes and illuminates the word. The Word sanctifies believers who then reflect the nature of God (John 17:17). God is glorified – though in a very different way – when people harden their hearts and close their ears. His holiness and righteousness are seen, in that case, not because rebellious people reflect his nature, but because they prove his word true, his character unchanging, and his judgments just. (Consider, for instance, Isaiah 6 and 29 and how they find fulfillment in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5.)

To preach the Word, then, is to declare in his name and by his power, from one or more texts of the Bible, what God placed there in order to achieve his ends for his glory. Or to put it negatively, we

fail as preachers when any source other than the Bible supplies our message, when our sermon's thrust fails to respect the thrust of the text, or when our aims, either immediate or ultimate, are contrary to the text's purposes. When we fail in any of these ways we have not given voice to God's word. We must let God's voice be heard in the assembly and among the nations. 'Preach the Word!' (2 Tim. 4:2).