

Preaching the Gospel

A monthly magazine for preachers and those who want to preach.

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The Work of an Evangelist (1)

Keith Sharp, Watertown, NY, USA

I have heard of people who quit attending a local congregation on the complaint that the preacher did not visit them. This excuse not only betrays weakness of faith, it also reveals a denominational attitude toward preachers. We need to ask ourselves if we want the preacher to do the work God has assigned him or to do the work sectarians assign their pastors. Thus we inquire, What is the scriptural work of an evangelist?

What Is an Evangelist?

Hopefully you have noticed that I have used the terms "preacher" and "evangelist" interchangeably to describe the same man. Paul solemnly charged Timothy both to "Preach the word" and to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Timothy 4:2,5). A "preacher" is a "crier" or "herald," and an "evangelist" is "one who announces glad tidings." These are two descriptive titles for the same work. Paul also encouraged Timothy to "be a good minister of Jesus Christ" (1 Timothy 4:6). Since the term "minister" means "servant," all Christians are ministers (Matthew 20:25-28), but preachers have "the ministry" (service) "of the word" (Acts 6:4; cf. 2 Timothy 4:5).

Denominational people think that a traveling preacher is an evangelist, whereas a preacher who works with a local church is a pastor. But "Philip the evangelist" apparently preached in the same place for at least twenty years (Acts 8:40; 21:8).

The Work Is Not

Many Christians expect preachers to take the lead in calling on the sick. The apostles, who were also preachers (2 Timothy 1:11), refused to "leave the word of God and serve tables," even though there was a legitimate benevolent need in Jerusalem that threatened the unity of the church (Acts 6:1-2). Other than the fact that ministers of the gospel should be an example in all good works (1 Timothy 4:12-16), preachers have the same benevolent obligations as all other Christians (e.g., James 1:27).

Preachers should certainly teach the word "from house to house" (Acts 20:20) as a very effective means of reaching the lost. And preachers have the same obligations to practice hospitality that all other Christians have (1 Peter 4:9). But the idea that a preacher and his wife should regularly entertain the members and go around to visit them is a false concept rooted in the sectarian pastor system.

What the Scriptures Say

The New Testament pattern for the work of an evangelist is exceedingly simple. Two passages, each involving the apostle Paul, summarize the work of a preacher.

Acts 20:18-35 records the beloved apostle's farewell address to the elders of the church at Ephesus. In it he reminds them of the work he did among them and thus sums up, by his own example, the work of a preacher. He reminded them how he "kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). He attested his own work thus:

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. (Acts 20:26-27)

The work of a preacher is the preaching and teaching of God's word, both publicly and from house to house. He must not hold back any truth spiritually profitable to his hearers but boldly declare the whole counsel of God. Only thus can he be free of blame before God if any of his hearers are lost.

Paul's charge to Timothy, which in principle applies to every gospel preacher in every generation, must be the core and sum of our every conscious endeavor as men of God. It constitutes our commission as soldiers of Christ.

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn away their ears from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

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To underscore the importance of his charge, the inspired apostle brings as witness God, the Creator of all, and the Lord Jesus Christ, our King and the One before Whom we shall stand to be judged on that last great day. But, as this command was to Timothy in his role as a preacher, it with equal force applies to all ministers of the gospel in each subsequent age.

Timothy's work, and that of every other gospel preacher, is amazingly simple - "Preach the word!" It is not to teach human philosophy, spout personal opinions, delve into politics, entertain with jokes and funny stories, or salve consciences with positive "pop-psychology" that promotes "self esteem." It is to preach the word. If our sermons are anything other than explanations and applications of

Scripture, we fail to fulfill our responsibility as evangelists. We must fill our minds with the love and knowledge of God's word and proclaim that word to all who will hear.

Our work is to "Convince, rebuke, and exhort." We must convince sinners of the guilt of sin (cf. John 16:8), chide them for these sins, and seek to lead them to repent, obey, and live faithfully to the Lord. In the immediate context Paul had reminded Timothy that the Scriptures fully equip us for this work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We must suffer long with the sloth of men in responding to the truth we proclaim and teach them gently and patiently that they might obey.

Many, including some brethren, are unwilling to receive all the truth. They cannot "endure sound doctrine" because they love their sins. They want to hear things that please their ears. Thus, they find teachers who will not preach unpleasant truths. Once people refuse the truth, false teachers will fill the void with the doctrines of men.

What should we do in the face of such unwillingness to hear all the word? We must watch for false teachers and false doctrine, warning brethren of their errors. Persecution will come from those who do not love the truth, but we must willingly endure it. Despite all temptations, persecutions, and oppositions, we must continue to do our work as evangelists. Only thus shall we be faithful in our service to God as preachers of the gospel.

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Web Sites

<http://www.parkwaychurchofchrist.us>--This is the web site of the Parkway church of Christ in Corpus Christi, Texas. David Smitherman is the preacher. The feature which attracted me is that there are about 20 articles from Robert Turner available. His articles on *The Church* are among the best you will read. This web site is worth more than a casual browse.

<http://www.uvachurch.com/index.html>--This is the web site of the North Charlottesville, church of Christ, Charlottesville, Va. Larry Rouse is the preacher. It includes several bulletin-style articles each week. A feature I liked is the series of comprehensive sermon outlines on *Jesus versus Mohammad*. Very good material.

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BOOKS

The Head Coverings of 1 Corinthians 11 by Paul K. Williams. This 150 page book is a careful study of everything I could find on the subject, with the conclusion that the instructions

of this passage apply today as they did when Paul wrote. It contains material which is probably new to most readers. Available from Preceptor Book Store and from my distributor, IIP, 305 Coffee Avenue NE, Russellville AL 35653 for \$6.95. Order through their web page www.spiritualservicesupply.com (In South Africa—R40 postpaid from me.)

Paul's Letter to the Saints at Rome by Bryan Vinson, Sr., rewritten in simple English with notes by Paul K. Williams. I think this is a very useful commentary. Published by J.R.B. Publications, P.O. Box 237, Bowling Green, KY 42102-0237. bobbuchanon@mindspring.com. Your favorite book store should stock it. I think the price is \$6.95 or \$7.95. (R40 in South Africa) If you like the commentary, supply some to preachers going overseas so that they can distribute them to preachers whose first language is not English.

Preaching With Power! by Gene Tope is based on the book *HOW TO PREPARE A SERMON* by H. E. Knott. Gene rewrote it and added chapters, and the result is a very useful book for preachers and aspiring preachers. Contact Gene for information. genetope@juno.com

The Sermon Garden

We find sermon ideas everywhere. But how to keep them? I suggest a sermon garden.

This is a file, either in a filing cabinet or in your computer, in which you drop the ideas which come to you for future sermons. It is called a sermon “garden” because it is intended to be the place where your ideas can grow toward becoming full-fledged sermons.

You are studying the book of Genesis. As you read 12:1-3 you are impressed again with the beauty and importance of those verses. As you study, you see that in these verses there is a three-fold promise which contains the plot of the whole Bible. So you begin to write. You are not attempting to write an entire sermon. You are just trying to get your thoughts on paper (or in the computer) before they disappear. When you finish, you have a half-page of things, but you do not have a sermon. It needs to grow.

You drop it in your sermon garden, along with a number of other sermon ideas.

Then one day as you are browsing through that file, those ideas “grab” you. You look at what you wrote down and start working again. This time you start checking commentaries and cross-references. You search carefully for apt illustrations. And you pray.

At this point it still may not be a sermon. Put it back in the garden. Later you will want to work on it again and shape it into the great sermon you want it to be.

By doing this with all your sermon ideas, you will not lack for sermon subjects. By letting your sermons “grow,” you will find that in their maturity they are better sermons than sermons composed in more haste. I recommend the sermon garden.