

The background of the cover features a photograph of a lighthouse on a cliff at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, red, and purple, transitioning into a blue sea. The lighthouse is silhouetted against the bright sky, with its light glowing. The entire image is overlaid with a grid of semi-transparent, overlapping colored rectangles in shades of green, yellow, blue, and red.

The REFORMATION:

A Return to the Primacy of Preaching

by Rev. Charles J. Terpstra

*“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.
How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed
and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?
and how shall they hear without a preacher?”*

Romans 10:13-14

**THE REFORMATION:
A RETURN TO THE PRIMACY
OF PREACHING**

TABLE OF CONTENTS :

Foreword:	pages	2 - 3
Introduction:	pages	4 - 5
The Need for Such a Return:	pages	6 - 11
The Reformation as a Return:	pages	11 - 17
The Significance for the Church of Christ today:	pages	17 - 19

(First printing - April 1999)

FOREWORD

by

Rev. Allen Brummel

Pastor of South Holland Protestant Reformed Church

Christ-centered preaching is the source of hope, comfort, and life for the regenerated believer. Those touched by the love of God desire above all to hear faithful preaching which directs them to their mediator and savior, Jesus Christ. By the 16th century, the Roman Catholic church had removed this source of comfort and encouragement from the saints. Empty relics and complex liturgies replaced the personal, powerful preaching of the Word.

In Martin Luther's zeal to make Christ central in all things, Christ was brought back into the worship service. Christ was not brought back in through a cold crucifix on a wall, but in the power and warmth of the faithful preaching of the Scriptures. "To place the Bible in a central position had been done by the theologians of earlier centuries. To place Christ in the center of the Bible as totally as Luther did, was previously unheard of." (*Captive to the Word*, A. S. Wood, p. 171)

Luther's conviction was that all Scripture had been given for the sake of Christ, in order that He might be made known and glorified. In Christ alone Scripture and worship find its meaning. Christ is the substance of Scripture. If Christ is known, then everything else in the Scriptures becomes plain and able to be understood. Luther saw every passage in the Bible, whether in the Old or New Testament, to point to Christ.

John Calvin shared this conviction with respect to the centrality of Christ in the preaching and life of the saints, demonstrating it by a life committed to preaching. Calvin knew and believed that the most important means that would be able to bring reform to wicked Geneva was the preaching of the Word. By the grace of God, the history of

Geneva's reform is a testimony to the power of God through faithful, Christ-centered preaching.

Rev. Charles Terpstra, the former pastor of our South Holland Protestant Reformed Church, demonstrates in this small booklet the fact that the Reformation of the 16th century was instrumental in returning to the church that which she so desperately needed - the primacy of faithful, biblical preaching!

Christ is God's grace, mercy, righteousness, truth, wisdom, power, comfort, and salvation given us of God without any merit. Christ is the salvation of the church. Christ must not only be proclaimed, but Christ must be heard in and through the preaching! The encouragement, salvation, comfort, and holiness of the church are dependent upon it!

During the years prior to the Reformation there was a void of Christ-centered preaching. Tragically, that void is again evident in our day. "*A Return to the Primacy of Preaching*", a Reformation Day lecture given by Rev. Charles Terpstra in late October of 1994, serves as a timely reminder and pertinent warning to the church of the 21st Century to maintain the primacy of preaching as that aspect of worship which God has ordained for His glory and for the edification of His sheep.

**"The majesty of God is...indissolubly connected
with the public preaching of his truth..."**

**If his word is not allowed to have authority,
it is the same as though its despisers
attempted to thrust God from heaven."**

-John Calvin on Jer. 5:13

THE REFORMATION: A RETURN TO THE PRIMACY OF REACHING

by Rev. Charles Terpstra

INTRODUCTION:

With humble gratitude to God, faithful Reformed Protestants commemorate the great Reformation of the sixteenth century. We say humble, because the Reformation was a mighty work of God's grace, and because we are the blessed recipients of this glorious tradition. Thus, as often as we remember this event, we must do so with thankfulness to God.

The heritage of the Reformation is rich. Consequently, there are many different aspects to the Reformation which are worthy of consideration. But one of the most important is that it constituted **a return to the primacy of preaching**. In this, we have the support of many other historians and analyzers of the Reformation. To quote one man who wrote on the Reformed tradition of worship:

Whatever else it was, the Reformation was a great preaching revival, probably the greatest in the history of the Christian church. Riding a rising tide of preaching in the late Middle Ages, the Reformers expanded the practice still farther, and gave it a significantly new function and character. (James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition*, p.29).

In this respect, the Reformation was a return to the days of the early church, when preaching was at the center of the service and when God's people came eagerly to feed upon the Word of God proclaimed from Lord's Day to Lord's Day. This is what makes the Reformation so pertinent to our day. For it is especially this heritage of the pure preaching of the Word which we count so necessary for the church of all

ages, and which is so precious to us. Every truly Reformed Christian wants faithful preaching, because he knows that this is the way of salvation God has ordained for his soul (Eph.4; Rom.10).

But we also realize that this heritage is being undermined and lost; it is being replaced today in churches which have their roots in the Reformation. This grieves us, as well as the Lord God. For this reason, this subject is relevant, even urgent, for our consideration.

We turn then, to our subject, dividing it into three parts:

The Reformation:

A Return To The Primacy Of Preaching

- 1. The Need for Such a Return,**

- 2. The Reformation as a Return To Preaching,**

- and**

- 3. The Significance for the Church of Christ today.**

PREACHING

"Through the preaching it pleases God through Christ, the exalted Lord, the Chief Prophet of God, Who alone gathers His church, to speak to His people unto salvation. This is very evident from Romans 10:14,15. In this passage we read, according to the original: 'How shall they believe in him whom they have not heard?' Through the preaching, therefore, you do not hear about Christ, but you hear HIM."

Reformed Dogmatics, by Herman Hoeksema, page 637

1. THE NEED FOR SUCH A RETURN:

During the Middle Ages (approx. 500 to 1500 A.D.) preaching gradually lost its place of primacy in the church, until it was all but lost from her life and work in the years before the Reformation. We should remember that the Middle Ages were in general a time of gradual but steady decline for the church. As she increased in her worldly power and influence, she decreased in her spiritual strength and influence. Sometimes the Middle Ages are referred to as the “Dark Ages”. This was certainly true also with respect to the preaching.

The days before the Reformation were preaching poor times. Many of the established clergy, bishops, and priests, simply did not preach at all. It is said that the lay people could not expect any preaching from the priests in the local parish. Weeks and even months could go by without their hearing any sermon from the pulpit of their local church. Many priests simply forsook their parishes (local churches), checking on them only on occasion. The English Reformer, Hugh Latimer, called such absentee priests “strawberry parsons”, since “they came only once a year and stayed for a very short time”, (quoted by G. J. Murray in *The Preaching of the English Reformers*, pp. 9,10).

Writing already in 1520, Martin Luther exclaimed,

Lo, whither hath the glory of the church departed! The whole earth is filled with priests, bishops, cardinals and clerics, and yet not one of them preaches by virtue of his office, unless he be called to do so by another and by a different call besides his sacramental ordination. (“The Babylonian Captivity”, *Works*, II, Baker, 1982, p.280.).

And if and when the bishops and priests did preach, the quality of the sermons was very poor. There was preserved in the worship service a place for preaching. This was called the “homily”, a brief sermon. But these homilies were for the most part nothing but borrowed sermons from the church fathers. The priests did not do any original work, nor was there any exposition of the Scriptures. The sermons were therefore

not edifying but boring treatments of meaningless subjects of the Middle Ages. In addition, these sermons were filled with many absurd stories and fables. Besides, even where the sermons were of good quality and content, they were most often read in Latin, which most of the people could not understand. On the character of these sermons John Calvin wrote:

...What sermons in Europe then exhibited that simplicity with which Paul wishes christian people to be always occupied? Nay, what one sermon was there from which old wives might not carry off more whimsies than they could devise at their own fireside in a month? For, as sermons were then usually divided, the first half was devoted to those misty questions of the schools which might astonish the rude populace, while the second contained sweet stories, or not unamusing speculations, by which the hearers might be kept on the alert. Only a few expressions were thrown in from the Word of God, that by their majesty they might procure credit for these frivolities. (*Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. & Trans. by H. Beveridge, vol. 1, p. 40).

This weakness in preaching also applied to the traveling preachers, the friars. These were special religious orders of men in the Roman Catholic Church, whose beginnings had been sound and good. This class of clergy arose because of a lack of preaching in the church and care for the sick and poor. Founded by Francis of Assisi and Dominic in the 13th century, they were organized into preaching orders, which would travel throughout the countrysides bringing the message of the gospel to the poor peasants. But gradually, these friars too fell victim to the abuses in the church. They gave in to the sermon style of the day, and worse, became nothing more than instruments of the pope.

Hence, also their preaching became corrupt and worthless. Instead of bringing the pure and simple gospel based upon the Scriptures, they resorted to embellished messages in which the stories of the Bible were mixed in with sensational fables and traditions, designed to entertain the peasants. Thus did they spread fact and fiction, truth and error, and therefore, confusion, throughout the countryside. The result was that,

though they still travelled preaching, the message they brought was not that of the gospel, but of loyalty to the pope and the need of money for the church coffers.

It is also striking but sad that with the preaching so bad and the people so ignorant, another method of bringing the gospel to the people was being used -- drama. Groups of dramatists would travel from town to town putting on mystery plays and passion plays. Sound familiar?! Yes, history is being repeated in our day! Entertainment once more fills the churches! And sadly, this occurs in Protestant churches which have their roots in the preaching revival of the Reformation!

But if there was little or no preaching done by the ordained clergy of the church, who was doing the preaching? Undoubtedly, there were a few faithful bishops, priests, and friars scattered throughout the vast regions of the church world who continued to bring the gospel to the humble city and country folk. But one Reformer was convinced that there was another faithful preacher at work in the church.

Hugh Latimer, in a sermon preached in 1548 denouncing the sin of a lack of sound preaching among the clergy of his day, announced whom he considered to be the "most diligent preacher and teacher in all England." Said he,

And will ye know who it is? I will tell you: it is the devil. He is the most diligent preacher of all other; he is never out of his diocese; he is never from his cure; ye shall never find him unoccupied... And his office is to hinder religion, to maintain superstition, to set up idolatry, to teach all kinds of popery. He is ready as can be...to devise as many ways as can be to deface and obscure God's glory. Where the devil is resident, and hath his plough going, there away with books, and up with candles; away with bibles, and up with beads; away with the light of the Gospel, and up with the light of candles.... Where the devil is resident that he may prevail, up with all superstition and idolatry; censing, painting of images, candles, palms, ashes, holy water, and new service of men's inventing; as though man could invent a better way to honour God with than God himself hath appointed. Down with Christ's cross, up with purgatory pickpurse, up with him, the

popish purgatory, I mean. Away with clothing the naked, the poor and impotent; up with decking of images and gay garnishing of stocks and stones: up with man's traditions and his laws, down with God's traditions and his most holy Word. Down with the old honour due to God, and up with the new god's honour.... Oh that our prelates would be as diligent to sow the corn of good doctrine, as Satan is to sow cockle and darnel. (quoted by G.J.Murray in *The Preaching of the English Reformers*, pp.70,71).

Such was the situation prior to the Reformation. Not only was the true biblical preaching no longer central; it was also virtually non-existent. How do we account for this?

There are especially two reasons for this decline and dearth of preaching. First, there was the rise of the authority of the pope, and with that, the decline in the authority of the Scriptures. During the Middle Ages gradual stress was laid upon the offices of the church. With this came a multiplication of offices: cardinals, bishops, priests, monks, etc. In particular, the office of the papacy came to dominate, when the bishop of Rome assumed the title of successor of Peter and head of the entire church of Christ. From that point, all it took was a few dominant popes, and the power of the pope was firmly established. And that is what happened in the Middle Ages. Yet these men were not satisfied with being the mere successors of Peter. Assuming to themselves the office of Christ, these popes took the position that they were the direct mediators between God and men; they were the voice of God to the people. Hence, the pronouncements they made, and the decisions they took were the infallible, authoritative word of God.

The result was that the authority of the church and her tradition were exalted above the Scriptures. As far as the church was concerned, the people no longer needed the Bible nor the preaching of it; they only needed to hear and abide by the teachings of the popes. The Bible and the preaching of it were even considered dangerous to the people. Because of these things, the Bible was virtually taken out of the hands of the people. And with that, of course, went the preaching.

A second reason for the loss of the primacy of preaching was the emphasis placed on the mass as the chief means of grace. During the Middle Ages great stress was also placed on the sacraments, and with that, on the formal, outward worship of the church. The result was that at the time of the Reformation the worship services of the Roman Catholic Church were filled with countless unbiblical rituals and ceremonies. But at the center was the mass. This was Rome's sacrament of the Lord's Supper, only with many abominable additions.

According to the Romish church an amazing thing takes place in the mass. First, the bread and wine are changed into the actual body and blood of Christ. And, second, the priest offers up the "body" of Christ in a real, atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people. Consequently, the people were led to believe that they were fed with the actual body of Christ in the wafer, and that this was the chief means of grace for them. They were taught that on the basis of the priest's repeat performance of Christ's death they had the forgiveness of sins. Their salvation, they were told, was tied to the mass.

It is not difficult to see that with this idea of the sacrament the preaching of Christ crucified had to take a back seat. In the mind of the church at that time, was it not far better to have Christ really crucified again before your eyes than simply to hear about it in the Word preached?

Thus did the mass become the heart of the worship service, because it was seen to be the chief means of grace. And the preaching was relegated to a low, insignificant place in the worship; it was no longer primary. Indeed, it was unnecessary!

For these two fundamental reasons, the priests and other officers of the church did not really need to preach, nor were they trained to do so. The priests did not have to bring the message of the gospel to the people. All they had to do was dispense the grace of God through the means the church established as the vehicles of salvation. The attitude that prevailed was: Why use the preaching of the Word when there are so many other easier ways to bestow divine blessings?

Hence, for the most part the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church went untrained in the art of sermonizing. Seminaries for the training of preachers were unheard of. Instead men were taught how to hear confessions, read the forms of the church, and follow her elaborate rituals and ceremonies. The result was an office of ministry that was woefully ignorant of God's Word, and consequently incapable of delivering its message to the people. Even if a priest had wanted to preach, he did not know how.

The most serious consequence was that God's people were being deprived of a true knowledge of God through His Word preached. Souls were starving since they were being fed stones for bread. There was a famine of the Word in the church (Amos 8:11). But God would not have it so for any longer.

2. THE REFORMATION AS A RETURN TO PREACHING:

The Reformers restored the Church to her central task - preaching.

They brought down the papal system and pointed out the errors of the mass. They denied the mass the primary place in the worship of the church. They cried down the sad lack of knowledge among the clergy and laity.

But what was to be done? What was to take the place of the mass? How were the people to receive the grace of God? How were they to be built up in the knowledge of the truth?

The unanimous answer was: by the preaching of the Word!

The Reformers came to this conclusion on the basis of the Scriptures themselves. The Reformation was a return to the centrality of preaching because it was a restoration of the Scriptures. As the Bible came once again into the people's hands in their native language, and as they poured over it, they came under the powerful conviction that the Bible was the sole authority for the faith and life of the church. Therefore, they took it up as their sword to bring reformation to the church. With this sword, they cut down the authority of the pope and exalted the

authority of God's Word, the Bible. With this sword they shredded the Roman Catholic Church doctrine and practice of the mass.

But with this instrument they also established anew the true doctrine and the pure worship of God. In the Scriptures they rediscovered the truths of God's absolute sovereignty in salvation, justification by faith without works, and Christ's Headship over His church. And here they found again that pure, simple, humble way of worship God has commanded - with preaching at the heart as the chief means of grace.

In this way did the Reformers become convinced of the indispensibility of the preaching. Having studied the Scriptures themselves, they came to see that the church could do without all the ceremonies and elaborate services. But there was one thing she could not do without, and that was the pure preaching of the Word. As they studied the Scriptures, they noticed that the prophets, Jesus Himself, and the apostles had all been instruments to bring the Word of God.

Consequently, they rediscovered the truth that the proclamation of the Word was God's method of salvation. This is easily verified from the writings of the Reformers. We are familiar with Martin Luther's 95 theses, which he nailed to the door of the castle church at Wittenburg on October 31, 1517. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these theses is #62 which reads, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God."

A little later in life Luther expanded on this in his "Treatise on Christian Liberty":

One thing and one only is necessary for Christian life, righteousness and liberty. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the Gospel of Christ... Let us then consider it certain and conclusively established that the soul can do without all things except the Word of God, and that where this is not there is no help for the soul in anything else whatever. But if it has the Word, it is rich and lacks nothing, since this Word is the Word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of power, of grace, of glory, and of every blessing beyond our power to estimate.

...On the other hand, there is no more terrible plague with which the wrath of God can smite men than a famine of the hearing of His Word, as He says in Amos, just as there is no greater mercy than when He sends forth His Word, as we read in Psalm 107.

... Nor was Christ sent into the world for any other ministry but that of the Word, and the whole spiritual estate, apostles, bishops and all the priests, has been called and instituted only for the ministry of the Word (*Works*, vol. II, p. 314).

Calvin reiterated this when in preaching on Eph.4:11-14, he said:

Now the fact is that it (ie., the church, CJT) cannot be built up, that is to say, it cannot be brought to soundness, or continue in a good state, except by means of the preaching of the Word. So then, if we earnestly desire that God should be honoured and served, and that our Lord should have his royal seat among us peaceably, to reign in the midst of us, if we are his people and are under his protection, if we covet to be built up in him and to be joined to him, and to be steadfast in him to the end; to be short, if we desire our salvation, we must learn to be humble learners in receiving the doctrine of the gospel and in hearkening to the pastors that are sent to us... (*Sermons on Ephesians*, Banner of Truth, 1973, p. 374).

In fact, it may be said that the Reformation itself was brought about through the power of preaching. How did the Reformation begin? It began with preaching. Men such as Wycliffe, Huss, Savonarola, and others before Luther, brought about reformation by preaching. And how did the Reformation move forward as an unstoppable force? By means of preaching! This was due to the fact that the Reformers believed preaching to be the power of reformation. There was present in the 16th century the radical wing of the Reformation, which wanted to use physical force and human power to effect change in the church. But the Reformers despised this, and instead held that only the preaching could effect change, since it was God's spiritual power.

This was concretely manifested in Wittenburg, when Luther returned there after he had been excommunicated at the Diet of Worms and subsequently hid at the castle at Wartburg. The radical element in

Wittenburg was threatening to ruin the true reformation of the church there by resorting to the arm of flesh. But Luther came and preached eight sermons in eight days, pleading with the people not to use force but to rely on the power of the Word. In his second sermon Luther stated clearly that the Romish mass was evil and that he wished it to be abolished. But he went on to say,

Yet Christian love should not employ harshness here, not force the matter. It should be preached and taught with tongue and pen, that to hold mass in such a manner is a sin, but no one should be dragged away from it by force. The matter should be left to God; His Word should do the work alone, without our work. Why? Because it is not in my power to fashion the hearts of men as the potter moulds the clay, and to do with them as I please. I can get no farther than to men's ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. That is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. Therefore we should give free course to the Word, and not add our works to it (*Works*, vol. II, p. 397-98).

A little later in the same sermon Luther gave an example of how his preaching had been the power in effecting the Reformation:

I have opposed the indulgences and all the papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and with Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy, that never a prince or emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing; the Word did it all. ...For it is almighty and takes captive the hearts, and if the hearts are captured the evil work will fall of itself (*Works*, vol. II, pp. 399-400).

Thus it was that the Reformers' labors consisted chiefly of the proclamation of the Word. Luther, Calvin, and all the other Reformers were chiefly preachers. It is true that they were also men who wrote and lectured. All of them wrote books, commentaries, catechisms, and letters. And of course, as pastors of established churches, they had their

regular duties of the ministry - bringing the word privately, leading meetings, and so on. But all of these labors were founded on and were the fruit of their preaching. The chief thing that has come down to us from them is their sermons.

That is because they saw their primary task to be that of preaching the Word. That becomes plain when one considers their labors in their respective places. Beginning in 1510, Luther preached at Wittenburg; and here he continued until his death in 1546. For 36 years then, Luther expounded the Bible in Wittenburg, first in the little chapel, and then in the great city church. He preached often: at least two times on Sunday, and usually three times a week, in the morning. And his method was to preach systematically through the Bible.

The centrality of preaching is especially evident in the ministry of Calvin at Geneva. When he came here for the first time in 1536, he immediately set himself to the task of preaching. But it was when he came back in 1541, that the labor of preaching the Word became dominant in his life and in the city of Geneva. Not only did Calvin himself labor in Geneva for 23 years chiefly as a preaching pastor, but he also established the preaching of the Word as central to the life of the entire city.

Shortly after he returned in 1541, Calvin worked with the government of the city to adopt an organized policy for the churches of the city. The result was the "Ecclesiastical Ordinances". In these "Ordinances" the work of the pastors was outlined. In the three congregations preaching was to be conducted twice on Sunday and every day of the week! These sermons were at least an hour in length and usually longer.

Furthermore, both Luther and Calvin trained men to preach and sent them out with the Reformation gospel. Believing that the chief task of office of pastor was preaching, they established schools and seminaries where men might be prepared for this work. Luther did this at the University of Wittenburg, and Calvin did the same with his Academy at Geneva. At these schools young men were trained in the doctrines of the truth and in the knowledge of the Scriptures. And with this

knowledge these men went out into all of Europe, Asia, and beyond with the message of the gospel.

Thus did the Reformers restore preaching to the lives of God's people and to the center of the worship service. For this reason too, God's people came readily to hear the preaching. In the preaching was the message their souls needed and craved. It was a refreshing oasis in the otherwise barren desert of the church scene. This God used to feed and nourish His people once again. Once more God's people had the Word, and with that, a true knowledge of God and of His works and ways. This was the great benefit of the Reformation as a return to the primacy of preaching.

In this connection, T. H. L. Parker, a significant and sympathetic biographer of Calvin, makes these comments regarding the preaching which the people heard due to Calvin's diligence in the pulpit:

Before he smiles at such unusual activity of the pulpit, the reader would do well to ask himself whether he would prefer to listen to second-hand views on a religion of social ethics, or the ill-digested piety, delivered in slipshod English, that he will hear today in most churches of whatever denomination he may enter, or three hundred and forty-two sermons on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, sermons born of an infinite passion of faith and a burning sincerity, sermons luminous with theological sense, lively with wit and imagery, showing depths of compassion and the unquenchable joyousness of hope. Those in Geneva who listened Sunday after Sunday, day after day, and did not shut their ears, but were "instructed, admonished, exhorted, and censured", received a training in Christianity such as had been given to few congregations in Europe since the days of the fathers (*John Calvin: A Biography*, Westminster Press, 1975, p.92).

This is our Protestant heritage. This is what God has given Reformed churches through the Reformation.

But where do we stand today? Is the conviction of the Reformers still our own? Do we believe that the preaching ought to be primary in the labors and life of the church today? Is this what pastors are giving

themselves to in their ministries? Is the preaching of the Word of God what we seek and love to receive each Lord's Day for the salvation of our souls and those of our children?

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE CHURCH OF CHRIST TODAY:

The church today needs once more to return to the primacy of preaching. Sadly, we are again seeing a serious decline in the important place of preaching in the church -- only now in evangelical and Reformed churches. Ministers of the gospel are forsaking their God-given duty to "preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2). They are busy with counseling sessions, with church meetings, with social activities, and with their own personal interests. And what is it that suffers? What is neglected? The exposition of the Word of God before the public assembly of the church on the Lord's Day!

Worship services are packed with new innovations -- beautiful singing by trained choirs, liturgical dancing, testimonies, dialogues, dramatic presentations, and many other forms of entertainment. And what gets less and less time and attention? What is shoved to the rear of importance in the worship service? The preaching of the Word!

But why is this? What is the cause or (are) the causes of this near loss of preaching? Is it that many evangelical and Reformed seminaries are no longer training their students to be chiefly preachers of the gospel, but rather counselors and liturgists and administrators? Is it that the churches are full of unfaithful shepherds who are feeding themselves and not the sheep of God? These may be reasons too. But they are all subordinate to a more basic and underlying reason.

That is that Protestant churches have forsaken the sole authority of the Scriptures and have, therefore, lost their confidence in the preaching of this Word. Reformed churches have been influenced by the higher-critical views of Scripture that swept this country at the beginning of this century. Men denied that the Bible was the inspired and infallible

Word of God through and through. They claimed it was more the word of man than of God. In this way they undercut the Bible's authority and power. And Reformed and Protestant churches have fallen for this lie. This is "the great evangelical disaster", as Francis A. Schaeffer points out in his book by that very title. Hence, Protestant churches have lost their confidence in preaching this Word. If the Bible is in fact mainly the word of man, why preach it?!

The English preacher D. M. Lloyd-Jones makes precisely this point in commenting on the decline of preaching in the 20th century. He gives as the leading factor accounting for the decline of preaching this: "...The loss of belief in the authority of the Scriptures, and a diminution in the belief of the Truth." And so he continues,

While men believed in the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God and spoke on the basis of that authority you had great preaching. But once that went, and men began to speculate, and to theorize, ...the eloquence and the greatness of the spoken word inevitably declined and began to wane. ...As belief in the great doctrines of the Bible began to go out, and sermons were replaced by ethical addresses and homilies, and moral uplift and socio-political talk, it is not surprising that preaching declined (*Preaching and Preachers*, Zondervan, 1972, p. 13).

That is where the church is at today.

What is the answer to this? A return to the Scriptures, first of all. And then, on the basis of that Word, a conviction that preaching is God's method of saving and building up his church. This, too, is what Lloyd-Jones prescribes:

So I would sum up by saying that it is preaching alone that can convey the Truth to people, and bring them to the realization of their need, and to the only satisfaction for their need. Ceremonies and ritual, singing and entertainment, and all your interest in political and social affairs cannot do this. ...What men and women need is to be brought to a 'knowledge of the truth'; and if this is not done you are simply palliating symptoms, and patching up the

problem for the time being. In any case you are not carrying out the great mandate given to the Church and her ministers (ibid, p.40).

This is the way the church will be gathered and her saints remain strong. What is it that God's people need? What is it that will still effect true reformation in the life of the church in these days of apostasy? It is the preaching of God's holy Word. This alone will be effective and blessed, because it is God's way. To this primary labor He has called and does call His church yet today. Anything less than this is disobedience to Him.

Let us be warned that a departure from this God-ordained method is sure to spell doom for Reformed and Protestant churches. Let us pray and work for faithful pastors to bring us the faithful Word. By all means let us preserve the pulpit!

In conclusion, let us hear once more from Luther:

Therefore, it must be a grievous sin not to listen to the gospel, and to despise such a treasure and so rich a feast to which we are bidden. But it is a much greater sin not to preach the gospel, and to allow so many people who would gladly hear it to perish, for Christ has so strictly commanded that the gospel and this testament be preached that He does not even wish the mass to be celebrated unless the gospel be preached.

...For this reason, it is so dreadful and horrible to be a bishop, pastor, and preacher in our times, for no one knows this testament any longer, not to mention that they ought to preach it; although this is their highest and only duty and obligation. They will certainly have to account for the many souls who perish because of such feeble preaching (quoted in A.S. Wood, *Captive to the Word*, Paternoster Press, 1969, p. 94).