

18. THE COVENANT AND THE PREACHING

A question that demands our attention is: how shall we address the church as God's covenant people? Should the preaching be directed primarily to individuals, rather than to the congregation as a whole? May we assume that those who are members of the church and are present in the worship services are all truly God's children? What about unbelievers and hypocrites?

Some suggest that we need to use an experiential and discriminating style of preaching, by which true believers are comforted, unbelievers led to faith, and hypocrites unmasked. The redemptive-historical approach, which stresses the objective truths of Scripture in their historical context and progression, is increasingly being criticized as too intellectual and no longer appropriate for today. We need a type of preaching, these critics believe, that speaks more directly to the heart and convicts the hearers' consciences.

Similar criticism has been directed towards covenantal preaching. We should not, it is said, emphasize that people belong to God's covenant, for this leads to automatism: the idea that, having been born into the covenant, we will always belong to it. Salvation is then simply taken for granted, no matter how we live. The need for regeneration and the call to sanctification are no longer sufficiently stressed, and the church falls into ruin. The doctrine may still be pure, but the members' conduct is unholy. Some have popularly phrased the problem as follows: "We talk the walk but do not walk the talk." We need a preaching which strongly emphasizes the Lordship of Christ: he is our Saviour only if we recognize him as Lord.

We should not lightly dismiss these concerns but consider them carefully.

In this chapter we will do so by examining how the LORD addresses his people in the Holy Scriptures. We are now not dealing with a missionary situation but with the preaching of the Gospel to an established congregation, which we have defined as God's covenant people, spiritual descendants of Abraham, ingrafted branches in the tree of Israel, people who are called out of this world to

be God's possession and a holy nation.

The promises of God stressed

Since in the New Testament congregation we meet the covenant people of the LORD, it must be addressed as such in the preaching. It is a very positive starting point which emphasizes the love of God manifest in Jesus Christ, through whom we became God's covenant people. As covenant people, the church is the recipient of the promises of God in Jesus Christ. The promises of the covenant are real and true, and must be accepted in faith.

Let me give some examples of this approach from the Bible.

On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter delivers the first sermon after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. His sermon is direct, concrete, and scriptural. When the people heard it, they "were cut to the heart" and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Please note that Peter has also addressed his audience as "brothers," a term denoting a common bond in the covenant (Acts 2:29). Peter's answer is simple and straightforward: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call" (verses 38, 39).

The preaching recognizes the audience as God's people, who must nevertheless repent from their sins. These will be forgiven. The reason for this lies in "the promise." This promise is for all who repent and believe, as well as for their children. The covenantal line of the generations is again followed.

What is meant here by "the promise"? Some restrict it to the receiving of the gift of the Holy Spirit. But the promise goes farther. It means everything that the LORD God has promised to his people in his covenant love: forgiveness of sins, renewal of life, and victory over sin and death in Christ. Peter here refers to two passages in the Old Testament. The one is from Joel, who proclaims escape from the great judgment which is coming (2:32), and the other is from Isaiah 57:19, where peace is extended to those who are far off and those who are near.

The preaching must focus first on God's covenant work and on the fact that he has achieved our deliverance in Christ. All the members of the church share in the promise of that deliverance itself and everything that results from it. All members are also bound by the obligation that comes along with the promise.

No classification method

There is a difference here with the classification-method of preaching, which seeks out various groups, each in need of a particular message: the unrepentant and the almost-repentant, the regenerate and the reprobate. This preaching is found in Methodist and mystical circles. Within these general categories, some preachers have distinguished still different levels. The minister is to address each class

separately. But such preaching is not covenantal.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written: “There is no greater fallacy than to think that you need a gospel for special types of people” (*Preaching and Preachers*, p.130). The congregation may exist of common labourers or learned people, but all are *sinner in need of redemption*. Lloyd-Jones adds, “It is a vital part of preaching to reduce all listeners to that common denominator.” We can understand what Lloyd-Jones means. We must all be convicted of sin. The Gospel of salvation and life in Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, must be proclaimed indiscriminately to all. The Gospel message is itself always the same: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Yet the “common denominator” is not only that all are sinners. When we address the church of God, all members also have in common that they are lawfully heirs of the promises of God, and must by faith and obedience take hold of what is promised in Christ.

Covenant love in Christ

The convicting of sin is always to be done against the background of God’s covenant love for his people. The prophets could in no uncertain terms unmask the sin and hypocrisy of Israel, but they did so in the light of God’s love. As Hosea says, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (11:1).

When the church gathers for worship, its members must be recognized as the covenant people of the Lord and addressed on that basis as the recipients of God’s love in Christ. This is extremely important for proper covenantal preaching. God said to Isaiah: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa 40:1, 2).

In the New Testament the starting-point is the same. The apostolic letters are sent to the *saints* in a certain place. These saints are people who have been called out of the world, have come to faith in Christ, professed him as their Lord, and now serve him. On that basis they must be addressed, like Israel, as God’s covenant people.

It is noteworthy that often in the apostolic letters the admonitions and warnings regarding a holy lifestyle come after the riches in Christ have been explained and applied. For how can we glorify God in our life, if we are not mindful of his work of deliverance?

The congregation must constantly be led to see the love of God manifest in Christ. This love heals and renews lives, and enables us to continue with our tasks and in our relationships. Every minister ought to remind himself on Sunday morning of Paul’s prayer on behalf of the Ephesians: “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so

that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:16-19).

It is the calling of the preacher to help the congregation grasp the greatness of the love of Christ.

Covenant blessings

The covenantal approach is often criticized as being presumptuous. People ask: are all members of the church really covenant children? Some think that the congregation must in the preaching be led to repentance and faith through a style that places heavy stress on sin and judgment. The focus is to be first on our depravity and condemnation. It is through the preaching of the law and its sanction that the hearers must be convicted of sin and begin to ask: “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37).

For example, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had little use for “the Gospel preacher who deals in the promises only without ever showing the terrors of the law.” Wesley would begin with a general declaration of God’s love for sinners, but then proceed immediately to preach the law “in the strongest, the closest, the most searching manner possible.” The highlight of a Wesleyan sermon was invariably the call to repent and believe. Wesley would ask, “What is the state of your soul?” And he would urge, “Stand up this moment, for God is willing to save you now.”

We should keep in mind that Methodist preaching often took place in a situation of evangelism, where no regular congregation existed. Nevertheless, the method is also followed in established Methodist congregations, where “backsliding” is often warned against. The positive decision of the moment in regeneration or re-dedication is crucial, for God’s further work depends on it. The element of re-dedication is important, for our weaknesses and life’s trials tend to separate us from our commitment to God. We must forcefully move on towards perfection. I mention Wesley at this point, for he has been influential in shaping much of the preaching heard in contemporary North America.

The Methodist style of preaching is direct and effective. Penetrating questions are asked about one’s following of the Lord. The call to repentance, faith, and holiness is important. The warning against backsliding needs to be heard by the congregation. In this respect we can learn from the Methodist style.

Yet there is also something missing. God has called his people to himself and addresses them on the basis of his covenant. In Deuteronomy 5 we read how Moses, having summoned all Israel, begins by placing God’s decrees and laws within the setting of the covenant: “The LORD our God made a covenant with us

at Horeb” (5:2). Out of that reality flows everything else.

God’s people are to be attracted by his love and not compelled by fear: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). You cannot frighten people out of hell; you must draw them with love to heaven.

It is noteworthy how many apostolic letters begin by offering thanksgiving to God for what he has given to the congregation. Romans 1:8: “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.” 1 Corinthians 1:4: “I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.” The church at Corinth certainly was not without serious flaws and problems, yet Paul begins with expressing his gratitude to the Lord for the many blessings which he has bestowed upon this congregation.

“This most joyful message...”

Sometimes, indeed, when the situation requires it, the apostles begin by expressing their concern, as Paul does in the case of the Galatians: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel...” (Gal 1:6). There are times when one must go straight to the point of concern. The call to repentance and sorrow over sin must not be missing. But the overriding tone in the epistles is one of gratitude, praise, and joy in God for what he gives to his church. (See also Phil 1:3-6; Col 1:3-8; 1 Thess 1:2, 3).

In the covenant of love we may begin with expressing our thanks to God and our joy in him for all that he gives us in Christ Jesus. This ought also to be the tone of the preaching of the Gospel: God’s love has come to us in his one and only Son. Preaching is always to be a joyous and positive exposition of the Gospel. The Canons of Dort use the phrase “this most joyful message” (First Head, Article 3) to describe the Gospel. Then the admonitions also give evidence of grace and are effective.

Covenant sanction

Because love obligates, there must in covenantal preaching be a clear and strong message that God’s judgment is reserved for all who despise the Lord and reject his word. The covenant always comes with a severe sanction.

This was true already under the old covenant. For serious and gross sins the death penalty was exacted. The dead body was sometimes hung from a tree as a clear sign of God’s wrath (Deut 21:22). We must remember, as it says in the law, that the LORD is a jealous God: he will not let his Name be defiled or his glory tarnished.

When Israel enters the promised land and the first Canaanite city of Jericho falls, the LORD expressly forbids the Israelites to take from the spoils. By keeping that commandment they would recognize that God gave them the victory: everything would go into his treasury (Josh 6:19). But Achan secretly took from

“the devoted things.” We know how the LORD brought this hidden sin into the open by punishing all Israel in the defeat at Ai. Achan was stoned and his family with him. God would not allow hypocrisy and secret sin in the promised land.

It is to be noted that a similar event takes place under the new covenant, shortly after Pentecost. In Acts 5 we read how Ananias and his wife Sapphira conspire to mislead the apostles and the church into thinking that they gave the Lord all the money earned from the sale of a plot of land. They seek their praise from people, and not from God. They think that secret sin will not be discovered and punished. But both are struck down by the Lord.

These two events, at critical times and at the start of a new era, show us how serious the covenant relationship is under the old as well as the new dispensation. We are to pay attention to this. The LORD God may not in the same public manner strike down unbelievers and hypocrites today, but the message of Scripture is clear: the covenant as a living relationship with God is not something to be trifled with. We are to be forthright before God and honest in the midst of his people.

It will be brought out in the last judgment whether we have served God with our whole heart, as Paul writes in Romans 2:16: “This [being accused by our conscience] will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.” In covenantal preaching the element of admonition against hypocrisy and secret sin may never be lacking.

Woe on unrepentant cities

There is an important rule in Scripture which also applies to the preaching. God’s judgment is more severe on unrepentant covenant children than on those who did not know of his demands. While everyone stands guilty before God and no one has any excuse (Rom 3:23), those who did hear but refused to repent are the more guilty.

Our Lord strongly denounced the cities in which he did most of his miracles, for they heard his word and saw his power, but did not believe. He said: “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgement than for you” (Matt 11:20-24).

Christ also spoke in no uncertain terms to the Jewish leaders (Matt 23) and dared to call them (as did John the Baptist) a “brood of vipers.” This is not to suggest that preachers today should engage in name-calling, but it does mean that preaching must be clear and direct, so that the congregation fully understands what is at stake.

The question for preacher and hearer both is not so much, “Am I a covenant

child?” but rather, “Do I *live* as a covenant child?” We must (more and more) become what we are: God’s children in Christ. When this line is consistently present in the preaching, the congregation will be edified.

Covenantal preaching which sticks to the text that is being explained and is well-balanced in presenting both the promise and demand of the covenant will teach “the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27). It will speak of repentance to God, of faith and salvation in Christ, and of the grace to continue and persevere (Acts 20:21 and 32).

Preaching covenantally

In summary, when we preach the truth of the covenant, we acknowledge the hearers before us to be God’s covenant children. The promises of the Gospel are earnestly proclaimed to them. God draws his people to himself with cords of love. The certainty and assurance of this love are seen in the great Mediator of the covenant, our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified but risen and seated in glory.

We begin with this love because it alone can draw people to God. Preaching is the proclamation of unmerited grace, given in love. We must say to God’s people indiscriminately: God loves his children, young and old, and has done everything for their eternal salvation.

At the same time, the conditions of the covenant must be explained and emphasized. There must be faith and repentance. This must be stated in a concrete and clear fashion. The covenant is no automatic guarantee of salvation, for it is a working relationship. The salvation of covenant children is endangered when they become lax and slack, for the devil always lies waiting at the door. Our sinful and weak nature continues to bother us. Therefore we have to give our utmost in the Lord’s service. It is especially terrible when covenant children fall into sin and turn away from God.

In all the struggles of life, we may know for sure through persevering faith and daily prayer that the victory is ours in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul encourages us in Romans 8:37 to believe that whatever hardship or trouble we may experience, “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” From beginning to end, covenantal preaching does not direct us to ourselves, but to God who has made us his children in Christ. Covenantal preaching will guide the congregation to the great riches of the Bible, of Old and New Testament together. God’s children will not doubt their status in the covenant, but strive more and more to show who they are in Christ.

Preaching that celebrates the triumph of Christ is not to be confused with human triumphalism.