

The Priority of Preaching in the Church's Global Mission

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Abstract

This article seeks to reemphasize the priority of preaching in the church's global mission. Current crises and sophisticated cultural resistance to the proclamation of the gospel tempt pastors, missionaries, and church leaders to reevaluate the most effective methods for ministry. Key texts are examined and applied to support the position that the methodological priority of preaching transcends generational, cultural, and historical contexts and that the preaching of the word is missionally effective in our current globalized context.

Keywords

Preaching, eschatology, man of God, word of Christ, mission

Introduction

This article has been written during the global COVID-19 pandemic. It is still not clear what the world will look like when the virus, which is ravishing not only bodies but entire societies, is brought under control. In my own country, the United States, as well as others around the globe, the science related to the pandemic has become weaponized politically, fueling social hostility among communities. Matters of ethnic discrimination and injustice have been

aligned with radical concepts of gender and sexuality to revolutionize the social fabric and social discourse of entire nations. No crisis has been wasted by media outlets, platforms, or politicians in advancing narratives that advantage their ideology, power, or wealth. The result is that pastors, missionaries, and church leaders must steward their ministries and the church's mission in a world entirely different from what it was just five years ago.

The question that presses on the heart of any pastor, missionary, or church leader who is earnestly engaged in their calling and authentically cares for the people God puts in front of them is *how*? How do we best fulfill our ministry and the church's mission in this radically revolutionized society? The answers I hear from many pastors are not encouraging. In a recent conversation, a pastor put forward the perspective that “perhaps preaching is not the best way to deal with these issues. We live in a gray world, and preaching is very black and white.” Another pastor in the emerging generation recently stated how the word has lost its “functional authority” for his generation in his cultural context. Simply preaching it will not be sufficient for his audience.

Too many of the answers one hears from contemporary pastors sound similar to the convictions expressed during the modernist controversy in the early part of the twentieth century. For example, missionary Pearl Buck expressed this assessment of preaching as she advocated for the modernist mission methodology:

Let the sole question about that missionary be whether or not he is beloved in the community, whether the people see any use in his being among them, whether or not the way he has lived there has conveyed anything to the people about Christ—not mind you, whether he has preached, for that is of no value.¹

Once again, pressing pastoral theological questions in these early stages of the twenty-first century seem to be, What value has preaching? Have our time and its troubles rendered preaching an outmoded means of ministry? Is preaching, as Christopher Ash interprets the contemporary perspective, merely “a heroic attempt by nostalgic Christians to sustain the methods of a bygone age”?² Or, as this article will seek to affirm, is preaching a *pancontextual* and *pangenerational* priority for pastors, missionaries, and leaders who seek to be faithful and fruitful in their ministry in the church? To address this issue, we will turn to the pastoral theology of the apostle Paul, the faithful, fruitful, pastor-missionary-leader.

¹ Pearl Buck, quoted in Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, (Willow Grove, PA: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2004), 418.

² Christopher Ash, *The Priority of Preaching* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2010), 18.

I. *Second Timothy 4:1–5*

Second Timothy 4:1–5 must surely anchor the theology in practice of everyone whose calling is to steward the word.³ These words are the urgent last words of an authorized spokesman of Christ, the apostle Paul, to Timothy, the apprentice to whom he has entrusted the leadership of the church in a strategic global city, Ephesus. In order to appreciate the relevance of this passage to pastoral theology in any time, we should reappraise ourselves of the context.

The apostle's first controlling category is the eschatological context in which Timothy and the church he leads find themselves. Paul would have Timothy understand that he exercises his stewardship in the context of the *last days* (2 Tim 3:1). That is, this age of God's redemptive plan in which the rule of God in Christ (through his death, resurrection, and exaltation) has now, by his Spirit, been inaugurated in heaven and in the hearts and lives of all those who are united to Christ by faith, but it yet awaits its consummation at the return of Christ Jesus (4:1). The context that Paul is most concerned that Timothy understand, and in light of which he must steward his work, is eschatological.⁴ It is not, in the first place, philosophical and cultural. Timothy must "contextualize" his ministry in light of *where he is* and (as we will see below) *who he is* in terms of God's plan and purpose for history, not first in terms of how cultural authorities define their time in history.

It is also important to note that the divine spokesman (the apostle) interprets and anticipates this last-days context not as one that is sympathetic to the rule of God or divine revelation, but one that is in rebellion against it, with all of the consequent sociological and even ecclesiastical implications (2 Tim 3:2–9), and resistant to it (4:3–4). The context in which Paul issued his charge to Timothy was, by nature, one in which there was moral and intellectual (not to mention cosmic/spiritual) resistance to the message entrusted to Paul, to Timothy—and now to us (2:2)!⁵ In other words, Paul's charge (4:1) is not plausible only in a "Christianized West." Rather, it is a charge for the entire time from the ascension of Christ until the return of Christ. This time will be characterized in every generation and in every

³ Cf. 2 Cor 4:1; 1 Tim 4:6; 2 Tim 2:2, 15.

⁴ For an orientation to the structure of Paul's eschatological perspective, see Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 1–41.

⁵ "As we preach the word of God we are not clothed in apostolic authority. We cannot bear their eyewitness to the risen Christ. But by God's grace we are numbered among those faithful men into whose hands the apostolic deposit has been placed." Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 61.

nation by an intolerance for (4:3) and rebellion against the revelation of God in Christ recorded in Scripture (3:16).

Appreciating this eschatological context means we must begin cultural analysis for pastoral practice (not least preaching) from the divinely authoritative interpretation of our contextual reality,⁶ not from interpretations of reality and plausibility already conceded to cultured despisers of the divine revelation we are charged to proclaim.⁷ Put plainly, we live and move and have our ministry where God says we do, and what fallen, finite cultural interpreters (no matter how sophisticated or powerful) say about what is plausible in our context should not have foundational or functional control over how we interpret or apply Scripture's prescribed precepts and patterns for pastoral methods! To put it positively, it is precisely because God's plan for the ages conditions Paul's charge that his urgency and priority about preaching the word is pangenerational and pancontextual.

However, the immediate global and social context in which Timothy received this charge is not without relevance and is, in fact, an encouragement to us to take up this charge in our generation. Timothy was exercising his ministry stewardship in Ephesus, a strategic, global city under the authoritarian structures of a globalized empire (however peaceable it might have been in a given time or location). That empire and its citizens and subjects knew seasons of famine, war and atrocity, and social oppression and injustice.⁸ The empire was populated by philosophical schools and "marketers" of narratives in the context of an idolatrous pagan religious worldview.⁹ All of this manifested the pronounced spiritual darkness in which this global city, the empire, and indeed the entirety of humanity had been "socialized."¹⁰ In other words, while Paul and Timothy's immediate

⁶ For a foundational resource on the priority of divine revelation and the epistemological implications for how one interprets one's ministry context over against the wisdom of the age, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor. 2:6–16," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 103–24.

⁷ See Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 17. On the issue of divine authority in contrast to how the "experts" of this age establish authority for their interpretations of reality, see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 145–49.

⁸ Cf. Acts 11:27–28; Luke 13:1; Jas 5:1–4. See Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, in C. K. Barrett, ed., *New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 15. Kenneth S. Gapp, "The Universal Famine under Claudius," *Harvard Theological Review* 28.4 (October 1935): 258, n. 2.

⁹ See F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 41–55. On the "marketing" of narratives by media, cf. Duane Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Duane Litfin demonstrates that precisely these kinds of rhetorical issues lay in back of the challenges to Paul's mode and method of ministry in Corinth.

¹⁰ Cf. Acts 19:13–19; Eph 2:1–3; 6:12.

context had not seen the technological advances of our present generation, their global, intellectual, social, and, most fundamentally, spiritual context was profoundly similar to the one in which we must steward ministry today.

With a renewed appreciation of this context for the apostolic charge to Timothy, we can now turn to the charge itself. The imperative that controls the passage is found in 2 Timothy 4:2: “*preach* ... the word.”¹¹ The verb translated as *preach* (*kērussō*, κηρύσσω) describes the activity of proclaiming a message authoritatively. The word would have conveyed to Timothy’s mind a herald commissioned and authorized by his master to speak on his behalf. To deliver the content entrusted to him was the only stewardship of a king’s envoy.¹² This is not unlike the familiar image of a modern-day ambassador representing a head of state.¹³ The trustworthiness and effectiveness of an ambassador are built on his accurate delivery of the head of state’s message/communication and his ability to “negotiate” with the state’s friends and enemies within authorized parameters. The import of the apostolic imperative for the steward of the word is to proclaim authoritatively and accurately what your head has commissioned you to say on his behalf and in his name.

This charge would have been reinforced by the apostolic reminder of the pastoral identity already given to Timothy. Prior to this charge at the end of 1 Timothy, Paul reminds Timothy to see himself as the *man of God*.¹⁴ To identify Timothy in this way is more than simply a call to be a godly man, though this call is entailed in the charge (1 Tim 6:11) and repeated in the Pastorals.¹⁵ As Jonathan Griffiths points out, the phrase “man of God” evokes the Old Testament background of the prophet.¹⁶ Thus, Timothy is called to see his office and stewardship in line with those of God’s servants such as Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, and Elisha.¹⁷ In other words, Timothy has already been positioned to take up this charge as God’s man entrusted with God’s word. Therefore, the apostolic charge is to authoritatively proclaim God’s word as God’s appointed spokesman and servant.¹⁸

¹¹ For an exegetical argument in support of this position, see George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 453–54.

¹² See Lothar Coenen, “κηρύσσω,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–1978), 3:48–57.

¹³ Cf. 2 Cor 5:20.

¹⁴ See 1 Tim 6:11–16 (especially v. 13); 2 Tim 3:17.

¹⁵ Cf. 1 Tim 1:5; 3:2–7; 4:7–8; 2 Tim 2:16–26; 3:10.

¹⁶ Jonathan I. Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study*, NSBT 42 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 58–60.

¹⁷ Cf. Deut 33:1; 2 Chr 8:14; 2 Sam 9:6; 1 Kgs 17:18; 2 Kgs 4:7.

¹⁸ The New Testament pastor/preacher is not a prophet or holder of the prophetic office; rather, as a *man of God*, his official stewardship is to herald the (now inscripturated) word of God. We argue below that the risen Christ, as *the prophet* (Deut 18:18), speaks by his Spirit

Even this brief consideration must, surely, reorient the heart, mind, and practice of any pastor, missionary, or church leader who is sincerely asking the question about *how* to minister effectively to people in our globalized twenty-first-century context. Preaching (i.e., the authoritative proclamation of the Scriptures) is not a culturally bound, outmoded methodology. Rather, it is the earnest stewardship of those whom God, in Christ, has appointed as his servants! To be sure, there will be seasons (sadly, even in the life of the church and her leaders) when this divinely prescribed priority will not satisfy a culture's preconceived commitments or preferred narratives.¹⁹ But the call upon the man of God in those seasons is to persevere in Spirit-given, hope-filled patience with both the message and the method entrusted to him.²⁰

This is true not only for reasons already observed, but also because of what the man of God is charged to proclaim: *the word* (2 Tim 4:2)! There is a divinely prescribed content to preach: the Scriptures that have been *breathed out* by God (2 Tim 3:16).²¹ Preaching is not simply a rhetorically functional form that the speaker must fill with content meaningful to his audience. It is the (primary) means by which the word that God has inscripturated is delivered to his people.²² Because preaching is the God-ordained vehicle for the communication of God's own word, it is given priority in the Scriptures and must have priority in one's ministry. God, as he has revealed himself and his will to us, is of preeminent importance; the means of communicating the breathed-out revelation should be given priority in ministry in his name. But not only the God-breathed nature but also the God-given effect of the inspired Scripture should compel us to prioritize preaching. The apostle also tells Timothy that the word he is charged to herald is able to lead hearers to salvation in Christ (2 Tim 3:15), is profitable for every

when the word is faithfully preached. On the cessation of the revelatory gift and office of prophecy, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1979), 55–116, and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 212–36.

¹⁹ This would appear to be the essence of the intolerance of and resistance to the sound teaching of the gospel described in 2 Timothy 4:3–4.

²⁰ See 2 Tim 4:2; 2:24–26.

²¹ For the meaning of *theopneustos* (θεόπνευστος) and its implications for the doctrine of Scripture, so foundational to a right view preaching, see B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 131–66; Sinclair B. Ferguson, “How Does the Bible Look at Itself?” in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 54–66, and John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Wooley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 29–35.

²² See the Westminster Shorter Catechism 88–89.

aspect of making disciples of Christ (v. 16), and is sufficient for the work entrusted to the man of God (v. 17). In other words, the preaching envisioned in the apostolic charge is the God-ordained means to communicate God's own words to accomplish God's saving and sanctifying will with God-given effect! This points to the conclusion that the need of the moment, eschatologically defined and profoundly relevant to our global context, is the authoritative proclamation of the God-breathed Scriptures. With God's blessing, sinners are challenged and saints edified and equipped (Eph 4:12–16).

This is the conclusion to which we are drawn if our heart is for the mission of the church in the world since the heart of the apostle was expressed in his charge to Timothy. As Paul pens his final charge when finishing his own fight and completing the course of the mission entrusted to him (2 Tim 4:6–7; cf. Acts 20:24), his heart is fixed on his son in the faith carrying on the mission. We see the need of the nations animating this final charge to his pastoral successor in his tethering of the imperative to preach to the command to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:5). In other words, the prioritization of preaching was missionally²³ driven. The prioritization of preaching was not, as it can be mischaracterized, the academic, mission-deadening practice of an increasingly institutionalized church. On the contrary, Paul saw preaching as the means to fulfill the glorious, global gospel mission to which Christ had commissioned his apostles and the church after them, to the end of the age (Matt 28:18–20).²⁴

This connection between a heart for Christ's mission and the priority of preaching is evidenced even more poignantly in a second key text for Pauline pastoral theology, Romans 10:1–17.

II. *Romans 10:14–17*

In November 2018, I was flying high over mainland China on my way to speak at a conference in Hong Kong. It was the middle of the night, and as our flight tracker indicated, we were in the vicinity of Beijing. I pulled up the shade to get my first view of this densely populated nation. I could see lights immediately below and spotted off on the horizon. My heart was drawn to pray that God would raise an army of preachers to serve this great nation. We had no idea at that time of the authoritarian crackdown already

²³ While this term is often misused, it remains, in my view, a useful description of a ministry philosophy focused on the commission Christ gave to his church.

²⁴ See also Luke 24:44–49, where the priority of preaching is brought to the methodological forefront of the church's mission.

strategized by the officials governing the nation below. Was my prayer, in light of what has since transpired, a naïve, misguided prayer that failed to address the real needs of over one billion people?

Paul addressed his letter to the Romans to a church at the center of a global imperial régime. On his heart, under the inspiration of the Spirit, was the apostolic mission to the nations. Romans is bookended, so to speak, with missional concern (Rom 1:11–15; 15:8–21). That concern also encompasses Paul's own nation, the people of Israel, and is given earnest, heartfelt expression in Romans 10:1: "My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved." Paul opens his pastoral-missionary heart even further by positioning these words immediately after his exposition of the great doctrine of election (Rom 9:6–33).²⁵ Out of this heartfelt disclosure of missionary passion, Paul addresses the four pastoral theological questions in Romans 10:14–17. Following a razor-sharp argument (vv. 4–13) to prove that the gospel he has preached (i.e., Christ, revealed in the Scriptures, is God's righteousness for everyone who believes in him) is the gospel promised in the Old Testament, the great missionary is compelled to ask the methodological question: *How?* Paul wants the church in the most strategic city in the empire left in no doubt as to the method by which the mission, to which his heart is so committed, will be effectively executed. So, in verses 14–17, this methodological question is asked four times in just three verses. And the answer to the repeated question is that the mission will be carried out through the preaching of those who, in fulfillment of the prophetic promise (Isa 52:7), are set apart and sent to preach the word (Rom 10:15)!

More astounding still is the declaration of the dynamic that makes the God-appointed method effective. It is in this preaching, by his own sent servants, that Christ himself actually preaches (Rom 10:17), and it is Christ whom they hear (v. 16b).²⁶ Paul expresses the same conviction and confidence

²⁵ It is worth noting that even this revelation of the reality of God's sovereignty in salvation is "bookended" by disclosure of the apostle's evangelistic heart (9:2; 10:1). John Murray comments on 10:1, "Here we have a lesson of profound import ... our attitude to men is not to be governed by God's secret counsel concerning them. It is this lesson and the distinction involved that are so eloquently inscribed on the apostle's passion for the salvation of his kinsmen. We violate the order of human thought and trespass the boundary between God's prerogative and man's when the truth of God's sovereign counsel constrains despair or abandonment of concern for the eternal interests of men." John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 2:47.

²⁶ Here we follow Murray's argument (Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, 2:58, esp. n. 16). Murray finds the argument for the priority of preaching so strong in the text that he is careful to note, "We are not to regard the apostle as excluding or disparaging other means of communication. But this is an index of the special place accorded to the preaching of the gospel"

about his own preaching as a sent (apostolic) servant in Acts 26:23; Ephesians 2:17; and 2 Corinthians 5:20. That is, it is through the faithful preaching of the servants whom he sends that Christ still preaches!

This apostolic conviction prompted Thomas Goodwin (reflecting on Heb 12:25) to write,

Because he is with us ministers in delivering of [the gospel] to the end of the world; yea, *Jesus Christ hath his pulpit in heaven to this day*; therefore, it is said, “Refuse not him that speaks from heaven.”²⁷

And John Calvin chose to apply this reality most vividly to his hearers:

If our Lord gives us this blessing of his Gospel being preached to us, we have a sure and infallible marker that he is near us and procures our salvation, and that he calls us to him as if he had his mouth open and we saw him there in person.²⁸

The heart-satisfying answer to the “how” question for the great missionary in his global context and eschatological moment was “preach”! Preach Christ from the Scriptures as the sent servant of Christ.

III. Practical Implications: Prioritizing Preaching in Pastoral Ministry and the Church's Mission

If all that has been said here is true, what are the implications for pastoral theology and the church's mission? Without attempting in any way to be exhaustive, I suggest three practical implementations that arise from our conclusions from the two texts considered above.

1. Renewed Thanksgiving

God has spoken to us in the Scriptures and, by his Spirit working through these Scriptures, given us a living word for our moment in history. Surely this should lead us as pastors, missionaries, and church leaders to give thanks to God. Deuteronomy 4:32 (cf. 4:7) cues us to the wonder of God having spoken to his people. In the Spirit-inspired, infallibly recorded

(2:61, n. 20).

²⁷ Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863) 5:538 (emphasis added).

²⁸ John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 25 (on Eph 4:11–12) in *Corpus Reformationum* 51:559, quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 41–42.

Scriptures, we are the inheritors of the most glorious and undeserved gift, the word of God! Pastors, missionaries, and church leaders can begin to take that as commonplace and cease to stand in wonder (cf. Isa 66:2b) of not only having the word, but of being graced to be a steward of it (Eph 3:2). A good place to start in prioritizing preaching is recapturing the preacher's gratitude for the thing he is charged to preach. It is no common thing to have a copy of God's inscripturated word and the charge to speak it to others.

2. *Renewed Trust in God-Appointed Means*

Historically, this was an issue at the heart of the Reformation. The Reformers' confidence in Scripture's God-ordained authority, power, and sufficiency caused them to do away with the extraneous and superstitious forms of Rome and centralize the preached word in their liturgy. This reform was symbolized by the moving of the pulpit to the center of the sanctuary. We must return to the conviction that God is wise enough and powerful enough to get his work done his way and trust his ordinary (and ordained) means rather than submitting the church's ministry to the authorities of human sophistication and speculation. This indicates an issue of faith for stewards of the church's mission and ministries. Do we believe what God has said about how he accomplishes his promises and purposes in the lives of his people both within and outside his fold? Do we still believe, as preachers, missionaries, and leaders of the church's mission, those texts that so compelled us to our calling (e.g., Isa 55:10–11; Heb 4:12–15; Acts 20:32)? Perhaps as importantly, do our practices in ministry align with what we say we believe? It has been said, "We seldom live what we profess; we always live what we believe."²⁹ Our ministry practices declare what we actually believe about the word of God and the priority of its preaching in the church's mission.

As he sought to explain the nature and mission of the church, R. B. Kuiper wrote, "The church's task is to teach and preach the word of God. Whatever else it may properly do is subordinate and subsidiary to that task." Kuiper goes on to demonstrate that on this understanding of the church's methodological priority, "the creeds of Protestantism are in complete agreement."³⁰ I take Kuiper's point to be that whatever legitimate and contextually wise ministries the church must deploy to engage people in different spheres of life and stages of discipleship, they are all "downstream" from the preaching of the word. This accords with what we have seen in Paul's pastoral-missiological methodology.

Is this, perhaps, an area in need of repentance for many of us? Is it possible

²⁹ Origin unknown.

³⁰ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 163.

that busyness, fatigue, fear, or the lure of earthly status and success have eroded our convictions about the functional priority (and power!) of God's word in our ministry? If this is the case, we ought to repent of our unbelief and practical disobedience. Drawing on God's grace in Christ we can turn from unfaithful stewardship back to God, "purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the way of new obedience."³¹ Is it possible that, for many ministries around the globe, this revitalizing repentance should begin with the place we have given to the preaching of God's word?

3. Renewed Commitment of Time, Talent, and Treasure

If, as we have sought to establish, this conviction is true to Scripture, it ought to have a prioritizing influence on the stewardship of the resources God has entrusted to us for deployment to the church's mission, namely, the pastor's time and talents (gifts) and the church's treasure.

The methodological priority of preaching should lead stewards of the word to give the best of their *time* (not necessarily *all* of their time) to its study and proclamation. Practically, this means identifying the hours in one's week that are most effective for study and writing and protecting these times as sacred, devoted to the productivity of sermon development. It also means managing one's time to maximize multiple opportunities to preach the word.³² Keeping with Paul's ministry paradigm in the strategic Ephesian context, the amount that he preached was astounding! The narrative of the Ephesian mission records that he preached publicly daily for two years (Acts 19:9–10) as well as privately from house to house (Acts 20:20), night and day, for at least three years (20:31). Even assuming this tally accounts for reasonable seasons of rest, the apostle is presented as preaching thousands of times during the Ephesian mission. Surely this prolific proclamation contributed to the astounding effect of this mission where "all in Asia heard the word" (19:10).

Prolific proclamation of the word has been a driving force in the reformation and revival of the church throughout history. Calvin's prolific preaching helped fuel the Protestant Reformation. According to one modern biographer, Calvin was, at one point, preaching a "total of ten new sermons every fourteen days."³³ This was alongside the publishing of the word through commentaries and disputations "answering the enemies of religion."³⁴ During

³¹ See the Westminster Confession of Faith 5:2.

³² This can be one virtuous use of digital media platforms.

³³ Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 112.

³⁴ Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1909), 30.

the Great Awakening, George Whitefield preached prolifically, according to some estimates at least 18,000 times in 30 years.³⁵ Great movements in the mission of the church have been driven by prolific preaching. Pastors and missionaries, stewards of the word as preachers and evangelists, who desire to be faithful and, under God's blessing, fruitful in the mission of the church must dedicate their best time and the bulk of their time to the preaching of the word, and church leaders in congregations and mission agencies who desire to see reformation and revival in the fields they steward can and should encourage and protect this kind of time management by their pastors and missionaries.

This also relates to the stewardship of *talents* or *gifts*. The prioritization of preaching does not equal a commitment to the exclusivity of preaching in the mission of the church.³⁶ There are other vital ministries necessary for the church to accomplish its mission of discipling people.³⁷ In fact, faithful, prolific biblical preaching will produce other discipling ministries in a field. However, the preacher of the word does not possess every gift needed to steward every form of ministry. Stewarding talents means recognizing not only one's own limitations but the gifts God has given others. The priority of preaching is protected and proliferated when the entire church is equipped to steward the talents Christ has gifted to each one in the multi-ministerial execution of the body's common mission (Eph 4:7–16). In order for the servant of the word to work as a “workman who need not be ashamed” (2 Tim 2:15), he must steward his gifts in a discerning and disciplined way. This includes recognizing the way the head of the church has also resourced his mission through other members of his body and working together with them (Eph 4:16).

One final practical note: If we believe in the priority of preaching in the mission of the church, it will call for the investment of not only the time and talents God has entrusted to his church, but also its *treasures*. God has afforded to those whom he has given material wealth the unique opportunity to contribute to the church's mission by resourcing pastors, missionaries, and ministries that put priority on God's primary methodology.

³⁵ John Piper asserts, “Sober estimates are that he spoke about 1,000 times every year for 30 years. That included at least 18,000 sermons and 12,000 talks and exhortations.” John Piper, “I Will Not Be a Velvet Mouthed Preacher: Living and Preaching as Though God Were Real (Because He Is),” *Desiring God*, February 3, 2009, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/i-will-not-be-a-velvet-mouthed-preacher>.

³⁶ I am indebted to Dr. Harry L. Reeder III for this observation and distinction.

³⁷ See Archibald A. Alexander, “Suggestions in Vindication of Sunday Schools,” in *Princeton and the Christian Ministry*, vol. 1, ed. James Garretson (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 344–72.

This is the most prudent, long-term investment those who have been gifted with giving can make (1 Tim 6:17–19; Phil 4:14–20). If what we have said above is true, members of Christ's church should look for opportunities to discerningly deploy the material gifts God has given them toward the preaching ministry.

However, material resources are not the only treasures the church has to deploy for the proliferation of preaching. One of our key texts asked, "How are they to preach unless they are sent?" (Rom 10:15). In order for the preaching of the word to be panna-national and pangenerational, the church must send the next generation of preachers from among its most precious treasure, its children and grandchildren. This will also necessitate seminaries that are committed to training pastors, missionaries, and church leaders in preaching and, even more fundamentally, fidelity to the doctrine of Scripture that faithful preaching is to proclaim.

We might ask, following the Scripture's prompt, "How shall they preach unless they are taught?" Remaining steadfast in the "gray," "complex," global world with its proliferation of ideologies will require theological education for preachers that goes beyond short-term, quick-turnaround training programs. Confronting the world calls for deep development of doctrinal understanding in an environment of mentoring to put theological precept into practice. In other words, a commitment to the priority of preaching for the church's mission in our time calls for the church to send the treasures of the next generation to seminaries that can train them to preach the whole counsel of God from one generation to the next (2 Tim 2:2).

Conclusion

In March 2021, the reputable pollster Gallup released a report that was sobering for church leaders. According to its study, there has been a dramatic decline in church membership in the United States.³⁸ The numbers reported might cause those who care about the mission of the church to lament the church's eroding influence on the nation and, as they have many times before, recalculate the most relevant means for reaching such an increasingly secularized mission field—unless, perhaps, they were also to consider a 2017 Gallup report that the primary reason people came to church and

³⁸ Jeffrey M. Jones, *U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time*, Gallup, March 29, 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=top.

stayed at church was the preaching that took place in the church.³⁹ This latter statistic should not surprise us, given the priority and place we have seen that God gives to preaching. But it should encourage us that God's means actually *work*! Contrary to the current cultural trends, present even within the church, God has purposed to use the preaching of the word of God by the man of God to lead the mission of God forward in the world. If we care about that mission, we must recommit ourselves to the priority of preaching to accomplish God's plan and purposes. May God raise up in this next generation an army of preachers who fit the description penned by Charles Spurgeon:

We want again Luthers, Calvins, Bunyans, Whitefields, men fit to mark eras, whose names breathe terror in our foemen's ears. We have dire needs of such. When will they come to us? They are the gifts of Jesus Christ to the Church, and will come in due time. He has power to give us back again a golden age of preachers, a time as fertile of great divines and mighty ministers as was the Puritan age, and when the good old truth is once more preached by men whose lips are touched as with a live coal from off the altar, this shall be the instrument in the hand of the Spirit for bringing about a great and thorough revival of religion in the land.

I do not look for any other means of converting men beyond the simple preaching of the gospel and the opening of men's ears to hear it. The moment the Church of God shall despise the pulpit, God will despise her. It has been through the ministry that the Lord has always been pleased to revive and bless His Churches.⁴⁰

³⁹ Gallup, *Religion*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>. The connection between these studies in relation to this topic was originally observed in the podcast by Harry Reeder, "Membership in Houses of Worship Drops to Lowest Level Since Survey Began," *Today In Perspective*, April 5, 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/membership-in-houses-of-worship-drops-to-lowest/id595347900?i=1000515797712>.

⁴⁰ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Early Years*, vol. 1 of *Autobiography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985). v.

The Stigmatization of HIV/AIDS Victims in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Gospel

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Abstract

One of the most challenging issues in dealing with HIV/AIDS in Africa is breaking through the stigmas surrounding the disease and building resilience in communities where large numbers of people are infected with HIV or otherwise affected by the pandemic. This article explores the relationship between shame, fear, guilt, witchcraft, and HIV/AIDS stigmatization by looking at key features of the African traditional worldview and culture. We point out predominant witchcraft beliefs and how they translate to community attitudes towards people living with HIV and AIDS. We highlight the influence of prevailing beliefs in witchcraft and how they aggravate the experience of fear, shame, and stigmatization by people infected with or otherwise affected by HIV. Relevant aspects of the gospel are brought to bear to answer these challenges.

Keywords

HIV/AIDS, stigmatization, shame culture, fear culture, witchcraft, ubuntu

I. Challenge

HIV and AIDS—especially in sub-Saharan Africa—still constitute one of the most horrific disasters that the human race has ever seen. A quick look at some of the frightening statistics establishes this fact. A 2013 World Bank report states that since AIDS first appeared in 1981, more than 65 million people have been infected, and more than 30 million people have died of AIDS-related causes.¹ Worldwide in 2011, 2.5 million people were infected with HIV, and 1.5 million died of HIV-related causes.² In 2018, about 74.9 million people had been infected with HIV, and 32 million people had died of AIDS-related illnesses. UNAIDS figures published in 2018 reveal that although there had been significant reductions in deaths from AIDS-related illness, the downward trend was not enough for the General Assembly’s 2020 goal to be reached. The annual number of global deaths from AIDS-related illness among people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) has declined by 34%, but reaching the 2020 milestone would require a further reduction of nearly 150,000 deaths per year.³ Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 68% of all new infections, and nearly half of all deaths globally in 2010 occurred in Southern Africa.⁴

It is shocking and painful to see, as several researchers point out, that with regard to the number of PLHA, South Africa had the largest number in 2016, with more than 6.3 million.⁵ In 2011, South Africa already had 2.09 million children orphaned from AIDS deaths. A 2010 research report, funded by the German Development Bank in collaboration with the National Department of Social Development, identified in South Africa a growing phenomenon of child-headed households.⁶ Unlike other disasters, AIDS is taking more lives, impacting the health of more people, and leaving more children and orphans homeless than any hurricane, earthquake, or tsunami.⁷

¹ World Bank, “World Bank and HIV/AIDS: The Facts,” 2013, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/hivandaids/brief/world-bank-and-hivaids-the-facts>.

² Ibid.

³ See UNAIDS, “Miles to Go: Closing Gaps Breaking Barriers Righting Injustices,” 2018, http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/miles-to-go_en.pdf.

⁴ See World Bank, “World Bank and HIV/AIDS: The Facts.”

⁵ M. Roser and H. Ritchie, “HIV/AIDS,” 2018, OurWorldInData.org, <https://ourworldindata.org/hiv-aids>.

⁶ S. M. Mogotlane et al., “A Situational Analysis of Child-Headed Households in South Africa,” 2010, <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/cura/v33n3/04.pdf>.

⁷ N. Keeba and S. Ray, *We Miss You All: Aids in the Family* (Harare: SAFAIDS, 2002).

II. *Problem Statement*

The 2003 UNAIDS Fact Sheet on Stigma and Discrimination and a new 2018 report point out that all over the world, the AIDS epidemic is having a profound impact, having its worst effect when individuals are stigmatized and ostracized by their loved ones, their families, and their communities and discriminated against individually and institutionally.⁸

The problem of stigmatization and discrimination is so serious that it has even been described as a second epidemic next to HIV/AIDS.⁹ The fear of stigmatization and discrimination leads to an endless circle of denial and silence. Fear of stigma makes people afraid to reveal their positive status by changing their behavior. Stigma and discrimination continue to play a huge role in the HIV response by hampering access to and uptake of critical HIV services. For instance, in Botswana, so as not to give away their HIV-positive status, 50% of new mothers continue to feed with infected breast milk instead of with uninfected formula, which would enable the babies to survive.¹⁰

Despite many efforts and programs to promote and facilitate disclosure, people with HIV often still conceal their status. Disclosure remains a contested practice among people with HIV and also brings anxiety to those to whom they do disclose. Research has revealed that most people on HIV treatment choose to manage stigma through nondisclosure.

How individuals discover and disclose their HIV status to others, as well as how they cope with their HIV status, is influenced by cultural and community beliefs and values regarding causes of illness, learned patterns of response to illness, social and economic contexts, and social norms.¹¹

This article considers the relationship between stigmatization, resilience, and the predominant worldview of the people in the communities suffering from the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

⁸ See UNAIDS, "Fact Sheet," 2003, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEA/PREGTOPHIVAIDS/Resources/fs_stigma_discrimination_en_pdf.pdf. Cf. also UNAIDS, "Miles to Go: Closing Gaps Breaking Barriers Righting Injustices," 2018, http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/miles-to-go_en.pdf.

⁹ M. W. Dube, "Towards Multi Sectoral Teaching in a Time of HIV/AIDS," in *HIV/AIDS: The Curriculum; Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*, ed. M. W. Dube (Geneva: WCC, 2003): vi–xii.

¹⁰ L. Brown, L. Trujillo, and K. Macintyre, *Interventions to Reduce HIV/AIDS Stigma: What Have We Learned?* (New Orleans: Horizons Programme, Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, 2001).

¹¹ Ibid.