

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

November 2, 2014
No. 3748

The Use of Our Gifts
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

Introduction

One more sermon on the church. There is one more aspect of the doctrine of the church that we yet wish to deal with today. As we have noticed, we cannot really separate our confession of the church from that of the communion of saints. The church *is* the communion of saints. It is the body of Christ of which all believers are members. There is therefore within the body of Christ as it becomes manifest in this world a certain organic life. We found in our last broadcast that simply having our names on a church membership role does not mean much if a person only fulfills the minimum required of him in the church. He is at best a weak member of the church. There is a life within the church and among its members that must be an integral part of the life of every child of God.

The Bible makes it very, very clear that this fellowship is not simply with God and with Jesus Christ. It is a fellowship that we share in with the saints! This is why we confess a communion of saints. We are members one of another. This means that we must live with each other, making one another a part of our lives. So, membership in the church is not only to be viewed from a legal point of view, but from an organic point of view too. When a person walks in unbelief he makes unbelievers a part of his life and communion. Believers make a life in the church with fellow believers. We live in and for church. This is an all important and essential part of our lives. Now, this we have applied in one area of communion. In our last broadcast we noticed that this has implications as far as the church as a whole is concerned. We asked ourselves the question: how can I use my gifts and talents and time for the church institute of which I am a member? We found that this placed on all of us as members here a financial obligation toward the church. It also places upon us the obligation to serve the church endeavoring to keep the unity of the church.

Today we are going to deal with a different aspect of this truth. Not only do we have an obligation toward the church as a whole, but we are called also to serve one another in the church. I must use my time and gifts in the service of my fellow members. And that because, as Paul points out in I Corinthians 12, we all have need of each other! This is going to be the content of our broadcast today. And we will address this because it too is a vital part of our being living members of the church.

Diversities of Gifts

Paul uses the figure of a body in I Corinthians 12. We read, for example, in verse 12, "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ." By means of this figure, God's Word here calls attention to the various functions of the members of the body and how the functions of the various members are all necessary for the function of the whole. It is a good figure too. The Bible also uses the figure of a house or a temple. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:22, "In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." Likewise, Peter writes in I Peter 2:5, "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." Obviously, the building to which these writers refers is the house of God or the temple. The church is one house—God's house. The church is the place where God dwells. He lives here among His people. It is not as if Christ's church simply belongs to God. God *lives* in this church. His presence is there. When believers gather together around His Word, then God is present and fellowshiping with His people. Already that blessed truth in itself has much to say about our place and calling in the church.

But what I am interested in today is the truth that God dwells in the midst of His church *by His Spirit*. The church is a habitation of God through the Spirit, Paul emphasizes in Ephesians 2. We are a *spiritual* house offering up *spiritual* sacrifices, Peter emphasizes in I Peter 2. The one unifying principle of the church is this: the work of the Spirit! We must recognize that work of the Spirit if we are to understand the communion of saints properly. It is important to know how the Spirit is working in the church among God's saints.

The Spirit, remember, was poured out upon the church of Christ on the day of Pentecost. That Spirit is the Spirit of our risen Lord whom Christ sends forth to dwell in the hearts of His people. The Spirit applies to every believer individually the blessings of salvation in Christ. Christ has earned for us salvation on the cross, and Christ sends forth His Spirit into the hearts of God's saints applying what He has earned to them. The Spirit is vital to our very salvation. When that Spirit enters our hearts, you and I become the abode of the Spirit. Through the Spirit Christ lives in us. That is true of every true member of the church of Jesus Christ. That is true of all elect believers. Christ lives in them by His Spirit. As that Spirit lives in our hearts He works in us the thoughts and the desires of Christ. Christ's mind and Christ's will become ours. As we have said, we have the heart of Christ in us! His mind is in us.

The Word of God exhorts the child of God, "Let this mind be in you that was in our Lord Jesus Christ!" We receive this exhortation because far too often the mind of Christ is *not* in us. The members of the church of Jesus Christ who ought to be living out of the Spirit of Christ fail to do so. Far too often what comes out is the works of the flesh, which are, according to Galatians 5:20 and 21, "wrath, strife, dissensions, heresies, and envyings." When this happens, we forget what is our calling toward our fellow members of the church. After all, the fruits of the Spirit are, again according to Galatians 5, "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, and meekness." When these guide us in our dealings with others in the church, we can begin to understand what it means that we are an abode of the Spirit.

Paul tells us in I Corinthians 12:4: "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit." Or again in verse 7: "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal." And once more in verse 11: "But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will." The Spirit of Christ as He dwells and works in the hearts of God's people distributes to every member of the church certain gifts. Those gifts are just that: gifts. We cannot boast in them. We may not lift up ourselves in pride in them. The Spirit of Christ gives to us certain gifts by which He intends to build up and edify the church. The Spirit divides to every man individually as He wills. We draw on the figure of a building once more. All of us are as so many stones that God, the Builder, puts in the building of His church. We are living stones. The Spirit of Christ lives in us. That means that each one of us has his or her own unique character. There are no two stones that look alike. If we all looked the same, we would be a pretty drab looking building. But you and I are diverse—very diverse! Paul explains in I Corinthians 12:4, "there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. Verse 5: "there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord." Verse 6, "there are diversities of operations, but the same God."

Verse 4 emphasizes that the Spirit bestows on God's people diversities of gifts. To each of member of the church is given his own unique gifts. Each member is given certain strengths. Some are given very logical minds. They are able to understand the doctrines of the church in a very clear way. Others are given steadfastness in the truth. Nothing will rock them. Some are given a high level of zeal, a joy by which we are gifted to speak with others about the truth. Some are given compassion and kindness. These feel for their fellow saints in their need and are merciful. Some are given the ability to teach, some to comfort, some to lead, some to say a kind word. God spreads these gifts throughout the membership of the church. I see it all the time. Some have several of these gifts. Some maybe have only one. But we all have them!

By the term "administrations" in verse 5 is meant "services"—our own abilities and talents to serve others. This is another way in which we are so diverse from each other. God has called us to so many different vocations in life. Some are talented one way and others another way. Some are given an artistic flourish, some are nuts and bolts type people. Some are given business savvy, others are given administrative qualities. Many women are gifted in caring for a family, gifted in the home and in helping others in the church. The list can go on. The Spirit gives us these diversities of talents that are distributed to God's people in different quantities and levels.

The third term, "operations," used in verse 6, means the works or functions we serve in our lives. Some are wives, some are mothers, some are husbands and fathers, some are leaders in the church, some are young, some are old, some are single, some are widowed, some are alone for other reasons. Some are ministers, elders, deacons. Some belong to the office of all believers in the church. Children, parents, grandparents. We all have our own place in the church, and each, in his calling, brings forth the operations, the works, of the Spirit. All these are the gifts that the Spirit divides individually to the various members of the church—who are the body of Christ.

Profit for All

Why does the Spirit distribute these gifts to the various members of the church? Well, not in order that they might hoard their time and talents to themselves. Not in order that the members might selfishly use these for their own advantage and the advantage of their family only. These gifts are distributed for the glory of the church! We are the temple of the living God. God dwells in us. And that makes the church beautiful! We are beautiful together, saints of God! Not by ourselves, but together as we are cemented into the walls of the church. An artist that is truly an artist knows that the beauty of anything consists in the correct symmetry, the perfect blend of colors, the perfect shades of dark and light, and so forth. The beauty of the church is the perfect blend of stones in its walls that fit together so exactly that the building when looked upon is glorious. The Spirit distributes to us our gifts and talents and places in this life in order that we together might beautify the church! When our time, talents, and virtues are blended together in the church there is peace and harmony. When others behold us working together in such a blend of these things, then we are beautiful to them! There is nothing more attractive to others looking in than when God's saints are using their gifts on behalf of one another in the church.

And that is not where it ends either. God uses this to bring glory to His own name! The psalmist teaches us that God beautifies you and me with salvation! He does this by the work of His grace in our hearts. He cleanses us in the blood of Christ. He sanctifies, washes us, scrubs from us the filthiness of sin. He conquers sin in us, and by His grace He makes us beautiful. In this way we reflect His beauty and grace. When others see in us the beauty of God, then it is God who is ultimately glorified, because it is the work of His grace. His name receives the praise. Very concretely! "Look at what God has done for them! Look how He works in their hearts and lives. Look at that church! It is beautiful! Obviously, God works there!" God glorifies Himself through us by means of the gifts He divides to us by His Spirit.

What then is our calling in light of all this? What does this doctrine of the communion of saints call us to do? We receive these gifts, Paul explains in I Corinthians 12:7, in order that we might profit everyone else in the church. We receive these gifts for the good of the whole. This has negative implications as far as our lives in the church are concerned. Ephesians 4:31, 32: "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." If we are to put our gifts to use for other saints, then certainly the works of the flesh that are in us can be given no room in our lives. We mentioned earlier what the works of the flesh are. But, as often as God Himself tells us to put off the works of the flesh, we are so quick to ignore Him. We rather let envy, anger, hatred, malice, desire of revenge have their way in us. We do this because our sinful flesh has a powerful hold on us! So strong a hold that sometimes we are not even willing to admit these sins in us.

The positive implications of using our gifts to benefit our fellow saints are also given us in Scripture. Romans 12:9-17: "Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another;...distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality.... Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men."

Need I explain these exhortations that the Word of God gives to us here? Our calling toward one another is clear. We are to use the gifts, the time, the talents, the place God gives us in this world for the sake of other members. To use the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, Q& A 55, "everyone must know it to be his duty readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts for the advantage and salvation of other members." Our actions, our words, our thoughts must be pure. The Spirit must live in us and guide us in what we do. We must actively guard ourselves—not just say, not just do, what comes to mind first. How many hurting and hateful words have been spoken simply because we did not rein in our sinful thoughts. How many stinging remarks and painful gestures have we not shown to others simply because we did not control our anger or our malice. We simply sinned! We may even have been right, but we sinned in the way we dealt with others. How insensitive we can be when we allow our sinful flesh to get the better of us. And there is not one who is guiltless. Love the neighbor as ourselves. Hurt when your neighbor hurts. Joy when he joys. Weep with him and laugh with him. Be a good companion to him and give counsel and advice as they are needed. Admonish in love and encourage by esteeming others better than yourselves. May we be led by the Spirit to walk in this way, that the church might be beautiful and God might be glorified!

Humble Confession

We make quite a confession here, do we not? Sometimes we are witnesses against ourselves! So much is involved when God's people in faith confess that there is a holy, universal church, the communion of saints. This must be a confession that we do not merely make with our mouths. We must make it with our hearts! We do confess this with our hearts, correct? We do believe there is a church that God has chosen and gathered throughout time? We do believe that we are called to join ourselves with that church where she is faithful to the calling God has placed upon her? We do believe that in this church we will find the communion of saints, correct? If you are not a part of that church in this world, then may God so work in your heart by His grace and Spirit, not only to see the need for Christ and salvation, but also to see the need to join yourself with the body of Christ in this world. May God also lead you to that church institute that is faithful to Christ her Head. For those of us who are members of such a church, may we be reminded of our calling among the saints. God grant us the grace to walk our confession in the midst of Zion.

Walk about Mt. Zion and consider her strength and her beauty. I am and forever shall remain a living member of that church! God preserve us there together with our children in our generations by His grace! God bless His church.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

*November 9, 2014
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*Preaching: The Power of God
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma*

Dear Radio Friends,

Introduction

The church of Jesus Christ is always developing. There are periods in history when the church is strong and prospers in the truth. But it seems as if those periods are short lived. So often in the history of the church her members become at ease in Zion. Instead of developing in the truth of God's Word, the church degenerates and departs from God. This takes place because the pastors and elders of the church begin to do what is right in their own eyes and fail to follow in the way of God's Word. The objective standard of God's Word is ignored or twisted to fit errors in doctrine and practice. Although God always preserves His faithful people and church, many in the church refuse to follow the clear teaching of the Bible.

This we find to be true today once again. Many contemporary churches believe themselves to be at the height of their spiritual development. They boast of what great things they do for Christ. But what Hosea was called to proclaim to the church of his day needs to be heard today more than ever: "Israel slideth back like a backsliding heifer." Hosea 4:6: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." This is not a rash or unfounded accusation leveled against the churches of today either.

When the church begins to lose her moorings in the Word of God, she does so over a period of time. She does not become apostate over night. A series of developments often take place that leave the church void of knowledge. Although certainly we can trace what is happening in the church world today farther back into history, much of what we see today began its rapid descent in the early 1970s. At that time the charismatic movement infiltrated established churches. This movement stressed as the proper work of the Spirit feeling rather than knowledge. Through the decades following, churches once steeped in the knowledge of Scripture became filled with members who are ignorant of what the Bible teaches. Ultimately, this has led to the malady we see in society today: the increase in the numbers of of unchurched people.

This has had a domino effect over the past 50 years. First, the inerrancy of the Bible was questioned. The Bible—its history and its doctrines—were viewed as unnecessary. Second, since faith is feeling, since an emotional high is the fruit of Spirit, the preachers became motivational speakers out to entertain and make people feel good about themselves. The preaching was no longer viewed as an essential part of the worship service. Other, more emotional, "means" to convey the gospel were substituted in the place of the preaching. Today people not only do not understand what proper preaching is, they also do not comprehend the indispensable need of the preaching for faith and life. They do not understand how the preaching is ordained by God as essential for a person's faith. The third domino that fell with the preaching is proper Sabbath observance. If the preaching is not an absolute necessity

for a person's spiritual life, then attending church services must not be all that necessary either. It becomes optional since the church has now eliminated the necessity to sit under the preaching.

And then the final domino—if proper Sabbath observance is optional, then what is the need for church membership? As long as I attend a worship service now and then; as long as I attend an occasional Bible study, whether affiliated with a church or not, I am a good Christian and need not join a church. This attitude toward the Bible, toward preaching, toward Sabbath observance, toward church membership has been promoted for decades—some 50 years already. Those converted in these past years to modern Christianity and those born in churches in the last 50 years no longer understand or see a need for any of these. Since the modern church and her teachers see no need for them, they have never taught the necessity of them. Blindness has fallen on much of Christianity today. No one can fathom the depths of the wisdom of God in His divine use of the preaching of the gospel. The result: our country is made up more and more of unchurched: a generation that knows not God—no, *two* generations now that know not God.

I have taken time to explain this because it is my intention in the next weeks to explain what the Bible teaches us about the preaching of the gospel. With that, I intend to set forth God's command to sit beneath the preaching, since it is of absolute necessity for our spiritual lives. May God convict us of the truth of His Word.

What Is Preaching?

Preaching the Word of God is not a New Testament phenomenon. It was the calling of the prophets of the Old Testament to preach as well. Jonah received this call in Jonah 3:2, "Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee." Isaiah, in his prophecy concerning Christ, said of himself in Isaiah 61:1 that He was anointed to preach good tidings to the meek. The psalmist sings in Psalm 68:11, "The Lord gave the word: great was the company of those that published it." Already in the Old Testament, therefore, there was "the shout of a king" among the people, that is, the cry that heralded the coming of the King. So, that God has ordained preaching as the means to save and feed His people is not something that began with the gathering in of the nations at Pentecost but was always used in the church.

The Old Testament meaning of the term "preach" is "to herald." In the New Testament there are *two* terms used to describe the preaching of the gospel by the church. The first one is the word from which we get our English word "evangelism." This word means to proclaim the good news of salvation. And indeed this is what the pastor is called upon to do from the pulpit each Lord's Day—proclaim the glad tidings of salvation. But this word for preaching is also used in a more general way to describe what every believer is called to do. All of us are witnesses to the gospel, all of us speak forth the glad tidings of salvation.

But there is another term found in the New Testament that is used to describe only the proclamation of the gospel by the preacher, or pastor. It is, once again, that word, "to herald." This word refers to the truth that the minister of the gospel is chosen by God to cry out or shout the word of a king. That is what the herald did years ago, long before the Internet, telephone, or mail delivery: he went out into the streets of the provinces and cities of the realm and cried out for everyone to hear the word of the king. As such, the message he brought—not one word omitted and not one word added—was the official word of the king. Moreover, these heralds were chosen to their position by the king himself. They were trusted and sent out in order to cry out or herald the king's commands.

Now, in all of this the Bible reveals to us what God Himself teaches us about preaching. It is the official proclamation of the King by men the King sends out. Who is this King? None other than Jesus Christ Himself. He is the Head or the King of the church. This is the supreme principle of biblical church polity: Christ alone is the King or Head of the church. He reigns over His people in the church. He is the head of the body, and we as members are subservient to no other head save Jesus Christ Himself. No man can claim that to himself. There is no vicar of Christ, there is no supreme pontiff in the church other than Christ Himself. It is His Word that goes out into the church and the world. He it is that commands all men to believe and repent. He alone through His Spirit calls elect sinners out of darkness and into the confines of His church. But since Christ is no longer on earth but in heaven, His Word goes forth through the mouths of those whom He chooses unto this task. Christ chooses such men by His church. Romans 10:15 teaches, "And how shall they preach, except they be sent?" Christ through His church sends out pastors and teachers into the midst of the church and world at large proclaiming the message of the King. The church trains and properly equips, calls, and sends men to preach the message of the King. That message is heard by means of the preaching of the gospel. The preacher takes in hand the Word of God and expounds to

God's people the Word of the King. What is that Word, what is the message of the ambassadors of Christ? The Scriptures, as they center in Christ and Him crucified.

Notice what Paul writes to the Corinthian church in I Corinthians 1:22, 23: "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness." Or again in chapter 2:2: "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Paul says, I determined not to bring to you anything else save the Word of the King of the church. Christ sends out His heralds to shout or to cry: salvation from sin through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The cross of Christ is the answer to the manifold sin and misery in this world. The cross of Christ is the only way back into the presence of God who has alienated us on account of sin. The cross of Christ pays the price of our guilt before God. The cross of Christ cleanses from iniquity and opens the eyes of those blinded in unbelief. The cross of Christ is the only source of joy and peace and assurance in this life. The *only* way! Christ gives this message into the hands of His servants and sends them out into the world and tells them to preach that gospel to all nations and peoples of the earth.

Now, there is something all of us must be aware of: there are many who do not preach this Christ in sincerity and truth. Christ Himself warns us that in the last days there will arise false Christs and false prophets who will say, "Lo, here is Christ, or there." Paul tells Timothy that in the last days evil men and seducers will wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. Many will come in the name of the King and teach a false Christ—a Christ they will pass off as the real Christ, but a Christ who is powerless to save, or a Christ that is only a wonderful teacher and example, but not a Savior. This is why the content of the preaching is more than simply the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

The message of the King is Scripture in its entirety. "Preach the Word" is God's command to the church in II Timothy 4:1. The Word—the inspired Scriptures that have as their central theme Jesus Christ and Him crucified. That Word of God is written in objective form so that no one can mistake it or deny it. And though evil men today still twist the simple testimony of the Scriptures to fit their purposes, nevertheless God's people can read it for themselves. The Bible contains the message of the King. This is what must be preached in all its beauty and fullness. Every preacher is under obligation to bring the Word of God to God's people, and all the while he must use it to bring God's people to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Listen to how Paul explains this in I Corinthians 2:1-5: "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." Paul went out into the cities of the world carrying with him the Word of God and preached from it the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He did not try to wax eloquent and intellectual so that no one could even understand what he was saying. He did not confuse people by his clever attempts to be witty and funny. He did not use enticing words or excellency of speech. He did not lay before people his own wisdom: his own anecdotes, his own advice, his own opinions in certain matters. He preached a simple message from the Scriptures. He expounded the Word of God.

What, I ask, do many churches and members of churches say about the preaching today? Many are concerned that preaching will take up too much time in worship, so the preacher is allotted but a few minutes. Many preachers are adept at preaching short moral homilies that perhaps contain a shred of truth but are without the power of the cross. Others take to the pulpit their political or social views. Others use the pulpit as a comedy skit to show how clever they are. Others who may speak for a longer period of time use the pulpit to promote their own private agenda. They teach a prosperity religion, or they work on people's emotions to incite them in the gifts of the Spirit. Even those who limit themselves to the Bible give but a shallow overview of a chapter or two of the Bible. Few today truly herald the message of the King: studying, expounding, mining out of God's Word the truth in Christ Jesus, and then proclaiming it and applying it.

Because of this, preaching today has become a lost art. It is little wonder that there are many who leave the church today. They are being given stones for bread and scorpions for fish. Who needs to sit under the preaching if the preaching is only that? Who needs to belong to a church if the church is giving them nothing? It is little wonder that those who yet remain in churches of today do not know of the power and efficacy of the preaching! They view it as only one more means among others to learn about the Bible. Discussion groups, concerts, or crusades are just as profitable to them. They do not recognize the power of God in the preaching because the power of God has not

been present in the preaching they received. And when someone explains to them that the preaching of the gospel cannot be replaced, that it is indispensable for salvation, that it is so important in the life of a believer that he may not live without it, they are perplexed.

Why make such a big deal out of the preaching? Because God makes a big deal out of the preaching! The prophets of the Old Testament preached the Word: “thus saith the Lord!” and the people rejected what they taught. Because they rejected knowledge, the Lord rejected them and cast them out. Today Christ commands His church to preach the gospel to every creature. Paul writes about the preaching in the first four chapters of I Corinthians. God’s Word commands in II Timothy 4:1-4, “I charge thee therefore before God,... Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.” In every epistle Paul explains the necessity and power of the preaching in the lives of God’s people. They cannot live, they may not live, without the preaching of the gospel. The command goes forth from the King of the church to the church: preach. Of course God commands His people to sit beneath the true preaching of the Word. For what other reason would Christ send forth the great company of preachers into this world if He did not want people to hear them?

Why Preaching

But why is preaching so much a necessity in the life of God’s people? What makes the preaching so special? Why is there no substitute for the preaching? What makes the preaching so unique a means of learning God’s Word? Paul explains it I Corinthians 1:18: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” That the preaching is the power of God unto salvation is repeated in verses 23, 24, and then one more time in I Corinthians 2:5. This is why so much of the contemporary church world of our day fails to understand: the preaching is the power of God! For a half a century her leaders have never taught this to her members! Her members are oblivious to it: the preaching is the power of God. What that means will have to wait for our next broadcast. Tune in then and we will discover the beauty and power of the preaching.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

November 16, 2014
No. 3750

The Beauty of God’s House
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

Introduction

We are studying the subject of preaching. The preaching is the chief means of grace ordained by God for use by the church and God’s people to grow in grace. It is the means God has chosen to work and to strengthen faith in the heart of the believer. In our last sermon we defined what preaching is. It is the official proclamation of the Word of the King by ambassadors or heralds. These heralds are chosen by the King of the church, Jesus Christ, and sent forth to cry out the Word of God. These men are given an official function in the church and in the lives of God’s people. Further, it is a proclamation of the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus. The church through her pastors preaches Christ crucified.

As such, there is a certain power in the preaching. It is not merely the word of men: their advice, wise counsel, or personal opinions. True preaching is a faithful explanation and application of God’s Word. There is power in that preached Word. Notice: I did not say that there is power in the Word of God. That is true too—but according to Scripture there is power in the *preached* Word. Paul uses the phrase “power unto salvation” in I Corinthians 1, the last several verses, and in the first few verses of I Corinthians 2. The word “power” in these verses is the Greek word that we use for dynamo or dynamite. A dynamo is a generator—not a small generator that lights a house when the electric goes off, but a huge generator that serves to lighten an entire city. Dynamite is not a firecracker that makes a loud pop, but it is a stick of explosives that will blast a huge crater in the earth. Such is the preaching. It is a dynamo—a strong power that produces the electricity of life! It produces in God’s people the light and life of

salvation. It is not instrumental in conducting the life of Christ, as electricity is conducted through wire. But the preaching produces the life of Christ in us. It is the dynamo itself. As such it is like a stick of dynamite that blasts through the barriers of unbelief and sin to open the eyes of the blind so they are able to see the things of the kingdom of God. The preaching actually works faith! The preaching actually strengthens and sustains faith. It is power in its own right! That is why it is so important to come under the preaching of the gospel. It is that important in the life of God's people.

In today's broadcast we intend to discover what makes the preaching so powerful, what makes it a dynamo. With this we also wish to consider today what this implies as far as worship in God's house is concerned. If the preaching is all powerful to save and strengthen God's people, then the worship of the church is necessary too. The one stands or falls with the other. The preaching becomes the very beauty of God's house.

God's Voice

To understand the power of God revealed in the preaching, we must first of all consider the content of the preaching. God commands His heralds: Preach *the Word!* God's Word alone must be the content of the preaching. This is true because there is power in the Word of God. It is God's Word! We read in Hebrews 4:12: "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." The Word of God itself is powerful. And when it is proclaimed, then that Word pierces a man's soul. It brings to his consciousness the thoughts and intents of his heart that are laid open before God Himself. That Word of God convicts men and women of their sin. Then that Word brings them to the cross of Christ to find forgiveness in the blood.

The Bible, therefore, contains what God has recorded for His people to hear. This is why it is so important to preach the Word of God and not our own wisdom or opinion. God's Word is powerful to convict and save. But that Word of God is powerful to save exactly because it reveals to us our Lord Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When sin and salvation are presented through the preaching, then God uses that preaching to draw His elect people out of the darkness of unbelief and unto faith and repentance. When sin and salvation are proclaimed through the preaching, then those who are already saved are reminded of their sin, so that they daily flee to the cross of Christ for forgiveness. There is power in the preaching exactly because there is power in the blood!

Neither ought we to forget the work of the Spirit through the preaching of the gospel. When the minister of the gospel proclaims to God's people what is contained in the Scriptures, that proclamation is what the Spirit says to the churches. This is a phrase repeated in Scripture in various places: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Rev. 2:7). The Spirit of God is the author of Scripture. When the preacher therefore takes God's Word in hand, then in a real sense the Spirit addresses the hearts of God's people. The Spirit not only reveals God's will to us objectively in the Bible, but it is the Spirit that works in the hearts of men irresistibly drawing them to Christ. In other words, when the preaching goes forth for all to hear, it is God's intent to use that preaching to save His elect people. The objective Word of the Spirit meets with the subjective work of the Spirit in the hearts of God's people. When God's elect hear the gospel proclaimed to them, the Spirit either works faith in the place of unbelief, or He strengthens the faith of them who already believe. The power of the preaching, therefore, lies in the power of the Spirit, who works through the means of preaching. This is why the preaching produces results. This is why the preaching is so important. It calls all sinners to repentance. Not just unbelievers, but believers too! The believer must understand that the preaching is not merely a tool to add to the church those who are saved. But the preaching is an instrument in the hands of the Spirit within the sphere of the church too. God's people need to hear the preaching because we are sinners who need to be called to repentance over sin too.

But there is more to this *power* of the preaching. The moment you and I enter into worship, we enter into the very presence of God! "The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him," the prophet says. It is not as if we are simply coming into a social meeting together with our fellow saints. When the worship service begins, we are ushered into the presence of God. Christ is present by His Spirit, and Christ speaks when the preacher proclaims to us the Word of God. In the Old Testament the prophets declared, "thus saith Jehovah!" Jehovah speaks to you. Hear Him. It is no different in the New Testament. No, the ministers today do not receive direct revelation. But they do have the objective revelation of the Word of God. And when they preach the Word of God, Christ speaks to us just as really as God spoke through His prophets of old. To the saints in Ephesus Paul writes in Ephesians 4:20, 21: "But ye have not so learned Christ; If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus." Paul addresses in these verses Gentile believers in the city of Ephesus. They

had never seen Christ, much less listened to one of Christ's discourses. But Paul says that they had heard Christ and had been taught by him. Paul could say this because they heard Christ through the preaching of Paul and others. Romans 10:14 correctly reads, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? *and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard?*" The power of the preaching is found in this: Christ speaks to us. We cannot believe unless we hear Christ speak to us. He is the Word that was with God and was God in the beginning. Christ is the Word we proclaim, people of God! We hear *Him* and we believe! This is why Christ still can say to the church today, "My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me." That was no doubt true in Jesus' day when He walked the face of the earth. His sheep literally heard Him speak and they followed Him. But today, too, the sheep of Jesus hear His voice through the faithful proclamation of the Word of God, and we today follow Him too.

And since Christ is the Word of God, since He is God, we hear God speaking to us today through the preaching of His Word. This is exactly why Paul says, "Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel! Woe is unto me if I preach anything but Christ crucified. Woe is unto me if I do not preach the Word of God!" That is why the believer also desires to sit under the preaching as much as he possibly can. He wants to hear his Savior speak to him. That says something about our worship on the Lord's Day. If indeed God speaks to us through the preaching, then that says something about His presence in the house of God when we meet for worship. What this says is of utmost comfort and joy to the believer.

God's Presence

You see, where the church gathers for worship, where God's people sit beneath the preaching of the Word, there God makes His dwelling place. Where we worship, there is the house of God. In a real sense, therefore, we can say that God's saints meet together in the house of God on the Lord's Day. The Old Testament is replete with references to the house of God, as we can tell from Psalm 84:1-4: "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God. Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee." The psalmist here speaks of the beauty of God's tabernacle or, literally, God's dwelling place. In a very real way, when God's people meet together in the house of God, God dwells with them. He tabernacles with them.

This is true because God is present in the preaching of the gospel, so He is present in our worship too. That is an awesome reality! When the church fails to understand the saving power of the preaching, when she fails to appreciate the power of God in the preaching, she also does not understand the necessity of worship. Here is the domino effect we were speaking of in our last broadcast. The members of the church can look at going to church in such a carnal way. They think they may take it or leave it. They can be there or not be there. It does not matter. It is like eating a delicious juicy steak. It is delicious. It is good. But it makes no difference if I eat it or not. I can choose something else to eat for myself other than steak. They fail to see the preaching and worship as the pacemaker that is necessary to keep their heart in constant rhythm lest they die.

When the elders call the church to worship, then God takes up His abode in the church. The reality confronts the believer that is spoken of in Psalm 27:8: "When thou saidst: Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Jehovah, I will seek!" Why does the heart of the believer seek the face of Jehovah in His house? Because there is nothing better than to sit at the feet of our beloved Father and listen to Him speak to us. We seek the face of Jehovah because He has chosen to speak to us through the preaching. When His Word is faithfully proclaimed, then we, the dear children of our heavenly Father, desire, we love to hear, Father speak to us. If we lose that idea concerning the preaching, then our worship is nothing more than a social gathering. But what a blessing it is, people of God, to have Jehovah in our midst speaking to us. What an act of condescension on His part! The great and glorious God of heaven and earth, before whom all the earth must bow in fear and trembling, has graced us with His presence. He has chosen to dwell with us and speak to us through the preaching of the gospel. "I am here," God says to us, "now, listen to me, and I will teach you the way of truth." And will we respond, "No time this week, Lord. I will catch you next week. I have something better to do today."

The means of grace God has ordained for use in His church need to be considered from the viewpoint of God's covenant. God's covenant is His relationship of friendship and fellowship with His people. In His covenant, God loves us with an everlasting love for Christ's sake. He becomes to us our Father and we His sons and daughters. He cherishes us. We sing in Psalm 132: "Thy Zion Thou hast chosen, Lord, and Thou hast said, I love her well; this is

my constant dwelling place, and here will I delight to dwell.” That is God’s covenant with His people. He is our God who dwells with us and delights in us. In that great love God chooses to nurture us, instruct us in His ways, and care for us as a good Shepherd who cares for His sheep. God has chosen to do that in His house—the place of His abode, His tabernacle. So He calls us to His house. “Come, seek my face.” And we, His children, hear that call and respond in faith by coming to the house of God. We then enter into fellowship with Him. We speak to Him in prayer. We sing praises to Him in song. We listen to His law or confess our faith in Him. We hear His Word read to us.

And then, well, then we receive what we have truly anticipated when we come to God’s house. We sit down in silence and we listen to God speak to us. How wonderful! Our heavenly Father has chosen to speak to us! And as we listen we learn of Him and we learn of our blessed Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. This is good! This is good! It could not be better than this!

In His house God gives us everything we need in order to be strengthened spiritually. He in love admonishes us for our sins and weaknesses. He gives us strength to withstand our enemies who war against us. He comforts us with the grace of the gospel. He encourages us to go on in life in the knowledge that He is there for us and will not forsake us in our needs. And we listen to it all. We drink it all in and when we finally leave our Father’s house we say: “It has been good to stand in the house of my God!” Then we go home and thank God that He has given us a place to go on the Lord’s Day where we can be fed by that Word. So many people do not have that blessed privilege. But we have been given it. We hear God’s Word.

The Believer’s Response

And the believer responds to that privilege in faith: “How beautiful are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts!” I look at the sparrows that make their nests around the spires of God’s house. They live there every day! They nest here. They raise their young here. How wonderful it is. They have found their place of rest. That is what I want. To dwell with God. Blessed are they that dwell in God’s house. This is where I want to live. This is where I want to raise my children. This house is where I come to rest awhile. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. There is no other place I would rather be on this day than in God’s house listening to Him teach me. I cannot think of any other activity that would be more pleasing to me (not to my sinful flesh, mind you, but to me as a redeemed child of God) than sitting at the feet of my heavenly Father.

“Oh, come on! Let’s have a reality check. Really? Is that really true? Would we really rather be here than somewhere else?” Yes, we would! This is reality! I know the sinful flesh is strong in us. I know that Satan hates the Lord’s Day and the saints gathering under the preaching of the Word. The temptation is strong, our sinful flesh is so, so strong to draw us away from the place of worship and the preaching of the Word. But examine yourselves and find what is the true desire of the heart of every believer.

When we rest in the bosom of our God there is peace and security. God’s house is a house of rest. Here we find a little foretaste of the rest that yet awaits us in heaven. This day is a day of rest. Let us enter into the joy of our rest by entering into the house of the living God—our Father. How lovely, O Lord, how beautiful, is the place where Thou dost dwell!

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

November 23, 2014
No. 3751

Thanks Be to God!
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

Introduction

There is a perfect harmony between the earthly and the spiritual. The two are inseparably related to one another. We may not confuse nature and grace, of course. But neither may we go to the opposite extreme and separate the realm of the earthly from the realm of the spiritual. It is not as if our earthly possessions have nothing

to do with the salvation we have in Christ. There is an intimate relationship between the two. When God saves His people, they view their earthly possessions in a totally different way than the ungodly do. Not only do believers view them in a different way, but they also use them in a different way. We use the earthly to seek the kingdom of heaven. We refuse to place our trust in uncertain riches, but we use what we possess as a means to seek a higher end. We become Christian stewards of that which God has given us in this life, and in wisdom we use our possessions to seek those things that are above.

Beginning in chapter 9 of the second letter of Paul to the Corinthian church, Paul addresses the whole subject of Christian giving. It is not as if the church in Corinth had a problem in this area. On the contrary, this church was giving diligently and abundantly to the needs of the saints. Paul commends them for that. But in this praise Paul draws their attention to the grace of God that worked in them, a grace that resulted in such giving. We read of this in II Corinthians 9:8: “And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.” Not only did God work in these saints the heart to give to the needs of others, but God also enriched them with material, earthly wealth in order that they might provide such help. We read in verse 11, “Being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God.” The idea here is that God not only worked in them graciously the spirit of giving, but also provided richly all things they gave. God is the one that in every way provided! This will come out today too as, in connection with this season of thanksgiving, we examine today II Corinthians 9:15: “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.” This short verse summarizes everything that in this season of the year the believer rejoices in: we give in everything thanks to God for His unspeakable gift.

An Unspeakable Gift

This week the United States celebrates giving thanks. The vast majority of the masses in our country use Thanksgiving Day for vacation, for watching football, for eating and drinking. And all of this okay too, but very few take even a little time out to give thanks to God for what they have received of His hands. Many will give thanks to other people or organizations for what they have received from them. Maybe those who are really into this day will make a list of people to whom they give thanks. Included on the list will be friends, family, employers or employees, and so on. But few today anymore take any time to thank God. Very few in this day understand that Thanksgiving Day was used by Pilgrims years ago to give thanks to God for providing for them in this new land to which they had traveled. I hope our broadcast today will serve to remind believers in this week to come to give God thanks, since He is the one who has given us all these things richly to enjoy!

To use Paul’s words in verse 11, God has “enriched us in every thing to all bountifulness.” God has given us everything—no exception—everything that we possess in this life. We can start with all the material comforts and luxuries we have—all the extras. Can you name them? You would be surprised how many possessions we have in this life that are not necessities, but extras. We do know what necessities are, right? When we pray that God gives us this day our daily bread, we are asking for necessities.

Jesus defines those necessities for us in Matthew 6:31: “Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?” To food and clothing we can add shelter. These are necessities. These are the basics of life—those earthly, material things we need to live in this world. Anything over and above these are extras. Here in America we live in a society of extras. So much have we been given that we have become spoiled in all the extras. We hear from our mouths the words “I want” more often than from any other society, even though we in America have been given more than anyone else. Americans are forever in debt because, though they have so much more than anyone else in the world, they want more of it. God has given you and me, dear listeners, much in the way of necessities and comforts. On Thanksgiving Day we stop for a moment. We pause. We think. *God* has given us these things. We did not earn them. We do not deserve them. God in His providence gives to us these many earthly gifts. They come from His mighty hand. He gives and He withholds. He gives and He can take, and He does at times take away. We are merely stewards of the earthly possessions God has given us. In this week, and really always, believers bow in humble thanks for the bounties of the earth God has again provided in this year gone by.

But these gifts mean nothing at all in themselves. That is something the unbeliever does not recognize. These earthly possessions are empty and vain in themselves. They mean nothing. In fact, they can be a real stumbling-block in our lives because we can start to put our trust in them. We can begin to think that life consists in these things. Life is houses, and cars, and entertainment, and so on. We somehow expect that we will find peace and happiness of heart in these things. These earthly, material possessions really mean nothing at all in themselves! I

mean, it is like a family living on a houseboat that is floating down the Niagara River. They can fix up the boat, make it pleasant for themselves. Have it heaped with all kinds of food. Have the latest in entertainment on it. And say: "This is life! This is living! This is good! Can't get any better!" The next day, the whole boat and everyone on it goes over the falls and is dashed to pieces and perishes.

The gift that believers truly give thanks for is an unspeakable gift. It is a gift of priceless possession—a gift that once given we cannot lose! It is a gift that, if we possess it, will have an effect on all those earthly gifts we receive from God. What is the unspeakable gift I am talking about? Salvation! It is a gift that God has given us in Jesus Christ Himself. In fact, if we were to focus exactly on the unspeakable gift God has given us, it is Christ! God sent forth His Son into this world. That was a gift. That Son suffered and died on the cross for us! That is a gift! That Son was raised again for our justification and life. That is a gift! That Son has sent forth His Spirit to live in our hearts. A gift! That Son preserves us in that salvation. A gift! And Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will usher us into the heavenly kingdom that awaits us. A gift! God gives us all of this in Christ Jesus our Lord! Talk about a reason for giving thanks!

Notice how our text emphasizes that all of this is a gift. Thanks be to God for His unspeakable *gift*. We all know what a gift is, that is, if something is truly a gift. It is something freely given to another—not because he has merited it or earned it. Most of the time when we give gifts it is to those we love or like, and simply is an expression of our appreciation for them. If this is true, then it is amazing when we look at what God does in bestowing gifts on His creatures. These gifts of God are not only not *earned*, they are not *deserved* in the least sense of the word. They are not an expression of appreciation by God for something we have done. They are given wholly, purely out of God's goodness! He is good!

The fount of all good! Out of His goodness He provides the creatures of His hand with what they need. Our earthly possessions are a gift given us by means of God's providence—God provides for all His creatures. Even the reprobate man receives earthly possessions and wealth from God's almighty hand. But the gift of our salvation that is given is even more so a gift! It is ours by means of God's grace! Is this not the testimony of the gospel to you and me, beloved saints? We receive our salvation not of works. We receive it only by God's sovereign and free grace. In fact, we were not even worthy of receiving this gift! We were doomed to perish in our sins. There was no hope! There was no way of escaping punishment for the sins we committed against God. Then God, freely and sovereignly, saved us. He in His grace sent His Son to die for us—the Son that He had loved from eternity. God sent Christ to bear the full punishment of His wrath against our sins and delivered us. This gift of God is unspeakable! We cannot express its beauty, its power, its wonder, its worth in human terms! We do not even know how to put into words the joy and thanksgiving that we have for what God has done for us in Christ!

How does one begin to describe what great things God has done for us who are saved in the blood of Christ? He has saved us and by means of that salvation has adopted us as His children and heirs unto life eternal. In His grace He has chosen to fellowship with us, to uphold us in our needs, to grant to us the knowledge that in every circumstance of life He, the great and mighty God of heaven and earth, is with us. He will uphold us in the hour of our greatest temptation and trial. He will lead us even through the valley of the shadow of death! He is our God and we are His people. The blessedness given us freely by the hand of God is indeed the greatest, most wonderful of all gifts! It is unspeakable, indescribable, unutterable, beyond our finite comprehension what God has done for us! Thanks be to God!

This salvation—this gift of God's grace to us—works in us overwhelming gratitude. And in that gratitude we take a new look at the earthly gifts we have received from God's hand. Now, we see that these are means that we can use to seek a higher end—that of our final salvation. No, they will not help us earn that end. But we can use them for the work of the Lord in this world. Not only do we use our money and our possessions to support our family. We certainly do not selfishly hoard that money and say, "It's mine! I will use it for me, for what I want." But we use it also to support the church and help those in need!

So, we get the instruction we do in II Corinthians 9:6, 7: "But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver." *That* is the relationship between the earthly and the spiritual gifts we receive from the hands of our God. But our thanks is given not simply because of the unspeakable gift. Look, also, at who gives it.

An Unchangeable God

Really! The beginning and end of all things is God. He has made all things, and to His glory are all things. When we give thanks we ought to be extremely aware of who it is to whom we give such thanks, fellow believers! It is our Father! It is God who loved us from eternity, adopted us in the blood of Christ, and sends forth His Spirit into our hearts by whom we call Him our Father. Our Father gives us this unspeakable gift! Oh, how He loves His children! Despite their weaknesses and sins, He loves them. How gracious He has been to us in giving us hearts to know who He is. So many are lost in blindness and do not know Him!

That love God has for His people in Christ is unchangeable! God has been faithful in this year gone by has He not? In everything we have received from His hand, He has been faithful to us His children. Even when God sends affliction in the life of His children, He is blessing them in His favor. God sends us affliction with a purpose in mind, not to crush us, but to save us. In this past season we may have received affliction. Or we may not have received as much from His hand as we have felt was our need. God controls all these things. But He does so in His love for us—a love that never changes! Good thing! We do not deserve His love. In everything we received from God's hand in this past year, what we rejoice in is that He has preserved us in the faith! He has not suffered our feet to be moved! The everlasting arms of our heavenly Father have held us up! God vowed a vow to us, His church. He married us and took us to be His bride and vowed a vow to us. He said: I will be your husband to have and to hold you from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer. I will love you forever. I will never leave you! I will be a faithful God to you and, despite your sins, I will never forsake you! God has been faithful to His vow! He is the unchangeable God in His love and mercy toward us! Thanks be to God!

But there is more to be added to this. You see, God as Creator and sovereign Ruler over all made a promise as regards this earthly creation. And on this promise we have come to rely as well. We would despair if not for this promise. It is given in Genesis 8:22, "While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." Here is a truth you and I do not think about all that often. We take it for granted. God promised after the Flood that seedtime and harvest shall not cease! Why is it that the seasons are fixed the way they are? The psalmist says that they are fixed by divine wisdom! God has fixed them. Every year without fail there is a seedtime and harvest. We rejoice in the harvest in this time of the year. We give thanks that the harvest is again taken in and there is plenty to support us again. Do not take that for granted, fellow believers! God gives us the harvest! To the promise of seedtime and harvest God has been true as well. Remember, He is the unchangeable God! Because He is, we are able to sow the seed in the springtime and to reap it again in the fall. And in this we see our calling too.

What God gives to us in His never-changing faithfulness we must be willing to give back to Him. Verse 8 of this chapter: "And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work." God's grace in our hearts abounds! We take a look at the unspeakable gift He has given us. Now, let us give to others who are in need! That is the idea of this passage of God's Word before us today. You see how God's faithfulness inspires us to use our earthly comforts and wealth in a frugal way? What then is our response to God, who gives us this unspeakable gift? Thanks! What shall we render to the Lord? Thanks! Wholehearted thanksgiving!

An Enduring Thanks

Do you know what thanksgiving is? It is expressing our gratitude to God for all He has done for us. Sometimes I wonder if our generations really know what it means to give thanks to someone. We are so spoiled. We actually think that we have something coming to us—that what is given us we have a right to. Someone gives us something and we turn and walk away without the least sense of gratitude in our hearts, much less upon our lips! Um, hello—where is the thank you? "Oh—yah—thanks." The word is idle and empty. It does not mean a thing. Giving thanks is an acknowledgment that we have received from someone something that we did not have to have or that we did not deserve to receive. It is then sincere appreciation that can be heard in the voice that we have received this. And it is walking away with true gratefulness in our hearts. That is thanks! When is the last time you thanked someone for what you received?

When is the last time we have truly given that kind of thanks to God? It should be there in every prayer—every prayer. Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift! Thanks for our salvation. Thanks that we can be numbered among the assembly of the elect in life eternal! Thanks that we can be children of the most high God! Thanks that we have been given a place in the church. Thanks for our fellow saints and the care God has shown toward us in His church. And thanks for God's tender care over us—upholding us even when times are so hard and difficult. And, yes, thanks be to God for taking care of us again in these months that have passed by. Let us count our blessings,

fellow saints! Name them one by one! Not just the earthly wealth that we have. Count the true blessings of salvation!

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

November 30, 2014
No. 3752

Holy Commitment to the Preaching
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

Introduction

The preaching is the chief means used by Christ in His church to work and maintain faith in the lives of His people. The preaching therefore is indispensable. God's people cannot live spiritually without it—without a heavy dose of it. We say this, of course, because the preaching is indeed the power of God unto salvation. When we hear the preaching, we hear the voice of the good Shepherd Jesus Christ. And it is that voice of Christ that makes the preaching effectual unto the saving of our souls. The preaching, therefore, has as its content Jesus Christ and Him crucified, but it is also Jesus Christ who calls to us in the preaching through the Spirit whom He sends forth to dwell in the church and in our hearts. The Spirit is the author of the Scriptures, the Word of God. When that Word is preached, then the Spirit of our risen Lord teaches us. But the Spirit also works effectually by that Word in the hearts of God's elect people, so that when they hear it they are strengthened in their faith by it.

But there is more to the preaching than that too, as we have found. When Christ speaks to us by His Spirit and Word, then God is present in our midst. God chooses to commune with us. As our heavenly Father He stands before His children and addresses them in His Word. We come into His house, the place of His abode, and we sit at His feet. He instructs us, admonishes us, encourages us, and comforts us as our Father. When the command goes forth, therefore, "Seek ye my face," we with hearts of joy respond, "Thy face, Lord, will I seek!" In other words, it is necessary to enter into worship on the Lord's Day because it is necessary to sit under the preaching. If a person views the preaching in a carnal way, he will view worship in a carnal way too. But when he views the worship of the church and the necessity of preaching in a truly spiritual way, he will say with the psalmist, "O Lord of hosts, how lovely thy tabernacles are! One thing have I desired, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of God all the days of my life!

Such is what we have studied in Scripture up to this point in our consideration of Q and A 65 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Before leaving this question and answer we wish to consider one last aspect of the preaching. It is a matter of very practical importance in the life of God's saints. It is a vital matter to the spiritual life of every believer. I broach the subject so that I can say with the apostle Paul in Acts 20:27, "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." The subject before us today is the obligation of the church institute to provide for her members the rich fodder or provender of God's Word. And the obligation of the members of the church to sit beneath the preaching in order to be fed by that Word. We consider today the awesome responsibility God places on the officebearers of His church to preach the Word in season and out of season. But we also consider the sacred duty God places on the members of the church to take full advantage of that preaching whenever it is presented.

The Church Institute's Chief Calling

The church institute is called by Christ to preach. "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel" is the last command Christ left His church before ascending into the heavens. Oftentimes this command of Christ is interpreted as the call to do missions and nothing more. There is more involved in the preaching, however, than merely going out to the nations and spreading the gospel. This command of Christ commissions the church, first of all, to perform her great calling. It is the chief calling of the church to preach. That is her work. Everything else she is called to do surrounds and supports that work of preaching the gospel. The church is not a social club. The church is not a relief agency. The church in her offices is called to preach the gospel. This preaching includes mission work, to be sure. But, in the main, this preaching serves an important function within the sphere of the

church itself. That function is set forth in any number of passages of Scripture. For example, after Christ's resurrection the disciples were fishing and saw Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in one of His appearances. In speaking to Peter, Jesus commanded him three times: "Feed my sheep!" or "Feed my lambs!" That is the chief calling of the church institute: she is called by her Savior and Head to feed God's people!

Now, this is an important work of the church. The officebearers of the church are to expend themselves to fulfill the calling of seeing to it that God's sheep are fed. This figure, of course, draws on the figure of a shepherd and his sheep. The sole task of the shepherd who led the sheep out of the fold each morning and into the hills was to see to it that they were led into the greenest of pastures and beside still waters to drink. While there, the shepherd protected them from those who would seek their harm. But the work to which the shepherd was called to devote himself was to providing food, provender for his sheep. He would not lead his sheep into a dry and dusty wilderness where there was little or no grass. He led them to the hills, where there was plenty of grass. He richly provided for them food to eat and water to drink, searching high and low for the best of pastures where his sheep could graze. And this too is the calling of the church: just as shepherds are devoted to providing an abundance of food for their sheep, so the faithful shepherds of the church are devoted to feeding their sheep. They will not allow their sheep to starve by giving them the poorest of grass or so little grass that there is leanness to the souls of their sheep. Faithful officebearers see to it that the Word is preached. They take seriously their calling: feed Christ's people! Feed them! Make them fat with God's Word! Provide that Word in abundance, so that the people of God's pasture might be healthy and happy. Preach the gospel. Preach! Do not hold back! Preach! And in doing so, feed my sheep! Read Ezekiel 34 sometime and learn of God's curse on those shepherds of Israel who failed in this calling!

That this is the task of the church is evident in the very offices Christ has ordained in the church. There is the office of the pastor and teacher, first of all. In Ephesians 2:11ff. God teaches us that the office of the pastor is for the perfecting of the saints, i.e., the maturing of the saints. This maturity is gained by the knowledge of the Son of God, so that we might grow up into Christ. The idea expressed here is that when the food of God's Word is administered to the saints, then they grow in knowledge and maturity. The elders of the church, both in I Peter 5 and Acts 20:28, are also exhorted, in their office, to feed the sheep. This is done by taking oversight of the task of feeding the sheep. The elders rule in the church institute on behalf of Christ. And in that rule they need to see to it that the church is providing an over abundance of food, that is, God's Word for God's people. Faithful elders take oversight of the preaching to make sure the pastor is indeed giving sufficient food for the sheep. The office of the deacon in the church is to make sure the ministry of the gospel is supported in order that the pastor can spend time doing the work of feeding the sheep. Providing spiritual food for the church and her members is the calling and chief task of the church in all of her offices. There can be no doubt about it that God's intention for His sheep is that they be filled, constantly filled, with the Word of God through the preaching of the gospel.

This too is why God provides the Lord's Day for His church of the New Testament. The Old Testament Sabbath was given the saints for worship. Christ came and fulfilled the Old Testament Sabbath, thus becoming the Lord of the Sabbath. This is why in the New Testament our Sabbath is known in Scripture as the Lord's Day. It is Christ's day, and He provides this day for the New Testament church to enter into worship. God provides a full day for His church to enter into the joy and peace of his rest. Mind you, God did not provide His church with half a day, or a couple hours of a day. God has given us the entire day: "Remember the Sabbath *day* to keep it holy." A full day. God says to the church, "Use this day to feed my sheep! Use this day to provide for them an abundance of spiritual food. Fill my people whom I love with my Word. Make them fat with the Word. Do not allow my sheep to go hungry!" So the church, in faithfulness to her calling, has done that throughout the ages.

In the Old Testament the morning and evening sacrifices were offered in the worship of the church. In the New Testament the command is issued, in Hebrews 10:25: "...Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is..." In the early church of the second century it was written in the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, under the heading "Every Christian Ought to Frequent the Church Diligently Both Morning and Evening," that "on the day of the Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's Day, (we) meet more diligently, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus Christ." This is the practice still followed in faithful churches today. Why? Because God's people must hear the preaching of the Word. They must be fed. The officebearers of the church institute utilize the whole of the Lord's Day in order that they may be blameless before the Chief Shepherd, who has commanded, "Feed my sheep!" It is not an arbitrary matter that the church meet either for a longer period of time or more than once on the Lord's Day. There are seven days in a week. God has given us six of them to do what we want and need to do. One day God sets aside, one day, and out of that day only a few hours are spent in church for us to be fed. We can sit that long in front of our TVs watching a sporting event, or worse, some movie that fills our heads with sex and violence. Is the church institute, are the elders of the church, requiring too much of us when they

fulfill the serious calling they have been given by the chief Shepherd. Hebrews 13:17 speaks of those elders in this way: “they watch over our souls as those who must give an account!” The church institute in her offices must give an account before Christ in the day of days: “Did you feed my sheep?”

Her Members’ Sacred Obligation

This calling of the officebearers toward their members, however, places upon the shoulders of her members an obligation—a sacred and holy obligation. Jeremiah 22:29: “O earth, earth, earth, *hear* the word of the LORD!” Christ reiterates, using a little different language, this command of Jehovah in Matthew 11:15: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” These words are repeated in the epistles of Paul and especially in the Revelation of John. This obligation of God’s saints is also implied in Christ’s command to His church to feed the sheep. Obviously, if pastors and teachers spend hours poring over God’s Word through the course of a week reading, then rightfully dividing or interpreting, and constructing a sermon that will feed the sheep, the sheep are under obligation to hear the Word of God to them. God instructs pastors to do such work exactly because God intends for His sheep to hear His Word. If this were not a holy obligation of believers, it is conceivable that the pastor puts hours of work into a sermon but no one will be present to hear it. If God commands the church institute to feed His sheep, then His command to us who are the sheep is to come and feed on that Word too.

Is this a command of God to sit under the preaching? Is it a command of God to gather in worship as frequently as possible? Is it a command of God to honor the Sabbath by using that day predominantly for worship? Indeed it is! “O earth, earth, earth, hear the Word of Jehovah!” Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy! Hearing God’s Word is indeed a sacred obligation! But just because it is a holy obligation does not mean it is a *forced* worship! God commands me to love my wife. I do so not begrudgingly. I do so not merely because it is my obligation to do so as a husband, but I do so because I take delight in my wife! God commands us to be faithful attenders in church, to sit under the preaching. We do so not begrudgingly or because we are forced to. We do it because we love to sit under the preaching of the Word. We take delight in God’s house. And certainly if that is not true of us as believers, it is not the fault of the gospel being preached but it is because of a spiritual deficiency in our lives. The preaching is the power of God in *oursalvation*. It is not an outward ceremony of the church that we merely prefer to attend. It is a life-giving power that we see as necessary for our spiritual lives—necessary for our souls.

Let me explain why this is true. Our God is a God of means. God works faith in the hearts of His children. But faith is something that needs to be fed and exercised. If it is not fed and exercised it becomes lean. We begin to think we are strong in faith when, in fact, we are languishing. God gives us means that we must use to feed and exercise our faith. Although there are certain means we are called to use as individual saints in our personal and family lives, such as reading God’s Word and prayer, there is a chief means through which God strengthens and encourages us in our faith. These means God gives to the church institute. They are the preaching and the sacraments. God has not given these means to individuals. He has given them to His church to be used there by the saints in unity with each other. Christ uses these means to strengthen not just individuals and families, but also His church. Failure to use these means in a spiritual manner leaves the believer weak and susceptible to sin and the onslaughts of this sinful world. I can say this, of course, on the basis of what God’s Word teaches us about the preaching of the Word being food for our souls. We cannot live without food. Good healthy food is the sustenance of our bodies!

The same is true of our faith. It needs to be fed. It cannot live and be vibrant if it does not receive a goodly amount of spiritual food. The church institute provides two good healthy meals each week in order to provide for our souls. Now, we can be a spiritual anorexic and deny ourselves those meals, believing we can make it each week without them. But the only ones we are fooling are ourselves. We cannot go forth in God’s service and strong in His might to conquer all evil and stand for the right when we have no food for strength. We as saints cannot minister to the needs of others or be of useful edification to the church when we are starving ourselves spiritually. We cannot stand against the wiles of the devil or be strong against doctrinal error if we are sporadic in our attending to the preaching of God’s Word. Paul tells us in Ephesians 4 that we will be as children, immature in our faith, being tossed about by every wind of doctrine that blows upon us.

Failure’s Inevitable

Consequences

In the latter days of the nation of Judah, God in His judgment upon this nation sent a famine of the hearing of God's Word. God had sent to the nation of Israel His prophets, who preached to the people the Word of God. But the people had rejected knowledge and therefore felt they no longer needed to hear the Word of the Lord. They forsook the preaching. Now, God's judgment rested upon them (Amos :11), "I will send a famine of the hearing of the Word of God." Is this what we are seeing in our society today? Where can we find the preaching of the Word? Many in Christianity today refuse to listen to the voice of God in the preaching. There is a famine of the hearing of God's Word. And the souls of the sheep have become lean! Dear listeners, be committed to the preaching of the gospel! If we are, then God will preserve us in our faith. But more, He will preserve our generations too. God will be gracious to cause us to grow and flourish as Christians. He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.