

Preaching or Teaching?¹

There are many “either/or” questions with which we struggle. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Scientists debate whether light is a wave or a particle. Today our subject is much more practical and relevant as we try to understand the difference between preaching and teaching. As we hear someone speak, we might ask “Is that preaching or teaching?” I ask, “Can it be both? Should it be both?”

What is the difference between preaching and teaching? Is it just volume, like the preacher who wrote in the margin of his sermon notes, “weak point, raise your voice”? Is it the amount of spittle that flies out of your mouth when you speak? What makes the difference?

As a pastor, I used to have people say to me, “You know, you’re more of a teacher than a preacher.” I used to say, “Well, that’s interesting,” an expression you can use when you have no clue what the other person is saying or you don’t agree with it. (You may be saying “Well, that was interesting!” after I finish today.) But I wondered, “Okay, exactly what is the difference between the two?”

It isn’t a putdown to be called more of a teacher than a preacher. There is a time and a place for both but knowing both what they are and when each should be employed is important.

I think everything that I want to say to you can be summed up in this statement: *preaching and teaching are similar but not synonymous and each one has its particular use in different settings.*

I want to first look at the similarities between the two and then examine the ways in which they are different and not synonymous.

SIMILAR

(1) Teaching and preaching both occurred in Scripture references about the ministry of Jesus

We see this in Matthew 4:23, 9:35, 11:1 and Luke 20:1. Notice that the teaching occurred in the synagogues. Preaching seemed to take more in an open air setting where the crowds would come while teaching seemed to take place more in the structured environment of a synagogue where most of those present would have had a religious orientation.

(2) Teaching and preaching both occurred in Scripture references about the ministry of the apostles

We see this in Acts 4:2, 5:42, 15:35, 20:20 and 28:31. Here we see less reference to teaching taking place in a more formal environment. In addition, many of the references in Acts describing Paul as “reasoning” or “debating” or “persuading” refer to teaching. In his correspondence with Timothy, Paul links preaching and teaching together (1 Timothy 2:7, 5:17; 2 Timothy 1:11, 4:2). A qualification for an overseer/pastor (although not all agree at this point) was an aptitude for teaching (1 Timothy 3:2).

(3) Teaching and preaching both occur in the modern ministry of a pastor

Given the fact that one qualification for preachers is an ability to teach, we can safely affirm the connection between the two. Preaching usually involves some teaching but teaching may not always involve preaching. Certainly there is an overlap between the two at times.

NOT SYNONYMOUS

Let's contrast the ways in which preaching and teaching differ because this helps know when one is more appropriate than the other.

① Description vs. Explanation

The word most frequently used in the NT for preaching is *kerusso*. It means "to announce, make known, proclaim (aloud), herald." The typical word in the NT for teaching is *didasko*, which means, "to teach, inform, instruct, or demonstrate." However, this word carries the idea of a relationship and an interaction between the instructor and pupil.

An illustration of the difference between the two might be found in the announcers' booth of a televised football game. Al Michaels is the play-by-play announcer and his primary role is to describe what happens on the field. John Madden, on the other hand, seeks to explain what just happened. One deals with the "what", the other with the "how" and the "why".

② Images vs. Concepts

A preacher draws upon the great imagery found in Scripture and seeks to paint a picture in the hearers' minds. He uses the discipline of storytelling and draws upon both biblical and human stories.

A teacher deals with concepts, the great ideas contained in the Bible. Here is what I mean by an "idea." A child saying a prayer thanks God "for my grape juice, for my cereal, for my milk" etc. He individually lists each item. As an adult, we synthesize all these and say "Thank You, Lord, for our food." There is a time and place for breaking things apart in order to study them. Yet the task of a teacher is not finished until they have come back and put everything back together.

Another way of saying this is that preaching is a right brain activity while teaching (at least with content) is a left-brain activity. The former specializes with creative things and employs imagination. The latter specializes with cognitive things and employs reason. Both are needed. Neither is wrong.

③ Passion for the Heart vs. Insight for the Mind

A preacher uses passion to speak to someone's heart and move them on an emotional level. He wants them to feel certain things and move the listener to action. The teacher, on the other hand, attempts to bring insights to the mind and cause the listener to think. Certainly, a teacher hopes to affect a learner emotionally but the process unfolds differently.

Someone had said that a teacher fills your outline while a preacher fills your heart. Both are valuable.

This point reminds us that we must be careful in how we distinguish the two and not build an impenetrable wall between them. In a given setting, we will both preach and teach, depending on our audience and our objective.

④ Invitational vs. Instructional

Perhaps a key difference between the two is that preaching is always invitational. It seeks to elicit a response from the hearers. Preaching asks you to do something and to do it in response to the message immediately. Teaching frequently takes a longer view of things and usually concludes without necessarily seeking a response to what was shared.

Another way of looking at it might be that preaching motivates us to act while teaching tells us how to act. One tells us “What” and the other tells us “How”

⑤ The Lost vs. The Saved

This characteristic probably contains the most potential for debate. I think when you look at the teaching ministry of Jesus and draw upon a little “sanctified imagination”, his teaching was in the synagogues and thus was focused on those with more of a “religious” orientation. Of course, being “religious” and being a believer, as we know it, is not the same thing. Jesus’ preaching seemed to be more “open-air” in nature and would have likely drawn a mixed crowd, made up of the spiritually inclined and disinclined. You may disagree with me at this point.

I don’t want to press this point too far and make the distinction too stark. However, I want you to think about it in terms of a question someone has posed about our contemporary practice: “What if we seek to preach to the saved and teach the lost?” Preaching to the saved is valuable but what about teaching the lost? It does seem that teaching in this context seeks to develop the listener in their Christian experience. Obviously, there must be something there to develop in the first place.

Hear my heart at this point: I am not being dogmatic. I am seeking to provoke your thinking. We must ask ourselves if attempting to teach unbelievers is the best approach in bringing them to faith. I’m raising the question and leaving you to grapple with the answer.

⑥ One-Way vs. Interactive

The very definitions of preaching and teaching seem to surface this distinction. The references in Acts to Paul’s activity of “reasoning” or “debating” in the synagogues, to me, clarifies teaching as a very interactive discourse. Of course, the size of the group impacts the effectiveness of an interactive approach.

⑦ From The Called vs. From Any Believer

In Ephesians 5:19, Paul talks about “teaching one another.” Hear “EACH” in the word “TEACH.” Everyone teaches at some point in their life. They may do it skillfully or not but they teach. Not everyone is called to preach. There is a difference in the subject of teaching and preaching.

Why does all this matter? Why is it important that we understand and appreciate the difference between the two? In different environments, those who sit before us have different expectations. In a worship service, there is more expectation of preaching. In a classroom, there is more expectation of teaching. Be aware of which environment you are in and adjust accordingly.

So how do we use both preaching and teaching appropriately in different settings?

APPROACHING EACH DISCIPLINE APPROPRIATELY

Preaching

I. Become Skilled at Painting Word Pictures

In 2 Samuel 17:1-13, the life of King David, humanly speaking, hangs in the balance. He has been forced out of Jerusalem and his son Absalom is deciding whether or not to pursue David. Two men speak, Ahithophel (un HITH oh fel) and Hushai (HYOO shigh) and offer counsel.

Notice the difference in the twos. Ahithophel uses a cognitive “left brain” approach and Hushai uses a visceral “right brain” approach. “Absalom heard what Ahithophel was saying but he saw and felt what Hushai was saying.”

Hushai took longer to say it and using word pictures does take longer. It takes time and skill to paint a word picture.

Wiersbe says that listening to Ahithophel was like reading a road map while listening to Hushai was like watching the scenery.

Information is giving out but communication is getting through. Ahithophel gave out but Hushai got through.

David prayed that God would defeat Ahithophel’s counsel (2 Sam. 15:31). He did but used Hushai’s visually-driven message.

Teaching

I. Become Skilled at Asking Questions

Jesus is the great Model for us at this point. He seems to have asked more questions than He answered. The Gospels record 226 different questions from 305 references.

He focused most of His questions on the disciples. He also had questions for smaller groups of people who came to hear Him teach.

Jim Smith, an executive coach out of North Carolina, categorizes six types of questions Jesus used: (1) About significance or usefulness (2) About consistency between behavior and belief (3) About clarity of understanding (4) About examining one’s faith (5) About thinking on a higher level (6) About commitment or awareness.

Great teachers have always used questions to gain and hold attention, to provoke thought, to check knowledge, and to draw about emotions.

In addition to being used by teachers, questions are the primary tool of a coach. Coaching is one of the most effective strategies in leadership development.

What I have just told you to do, in a few brief moments and statements, is a lifelong pursuit. You will not become skilled in either painting word pictures or asking great questions overnight. Be prepared to spend the rest of your ministry developing these skills.

2. Speak Out of Your Experience

People do not come to hear you preach your doubts or uncertainties. Goethe said, "I have doubts enough of my own. Tell me of your certainties."

Great preaching is marked by passion because it comes from the life experience of the preacher. Beware of "the travel agent syndrome", describing places you have never been to.

3. Tell the Listener the Gospel

Preaching concerns itself with the Gospel, the message that Christ came to this earth and died for our sins that we be reconciled to God. However, this is not to say that all preaching is solely evangelistic. The New Testament draws out the implications of the Gospel for our daily lives, for the function of our churches, and for our pursuit of the Great Commission, both at-home and abroad.

4. Recognize the type of Biblical material you are working with

Wiersbe uses this analogy:

One of the funniest plots for a comedy is to have a couple go to a masquerade party dressed in outlandish costumes, only to discover that they read the calendar wrong and have walked in on a formal dinner party. Now if I deal with Psalm 103 the same way as Ephesians 1, I'm wearing a costume to a formal dinner. It covers me up, but it doesn't seem to fit the occasion. (*Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*, 313)

Certain types of Biblical material will lend itself better to preaching, while others to teaching. Use both approaches to best communicate with your audience.

2. Draw Out The Experiences of Others

Teachers, on the other hand, draw out others' experiences. Perhaps this is why people prefer teaching over preaching, it is more about them. Still it is important and there is a place for it.

Design exercises and activities in your teaching that allow people to tell their story and to connect your information with their experience.

3. Tell the Listener Nothing They Can Learn for Themselves

One of Howard Hendricks' principles of transformational teaching is leading people to learn things for themselves. He certainly does not mean that we learn things for ourselves apart from biblical revelation. Rather, it is the model of the Berean believers in Acts 17: 11 who "welcomed the message with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."

We want our learners to act upon the knowledge they gain. Learning something for one's self increases the likelihood that will happen.

Preaching and teaching both have tremendous value for the kingdom of God and the ministry of the church. Hopefully, your understanding of each is a little clearer and this will enable you to use each more effectively in the ministry to which God has called you.

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