

MINISTRY: Are We Preaching or Reaching?

In the tapestry of faith and amidst the complexities of our culture, the question persists: Should we prioritize preaching or reaching? This inquiry, however, is not a matter of choosing one over the other but rather recognizing the complementary nature of both endeavors.

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Drawing from timeless wisdom, let us first heed the words of Matthew 28:19-20 (MEV), where Jesus commissions His disciples, saying, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen." This Scripture emphasizes the importance of preaching, of boldly proclaiming the gospel message to all who will listen.

Preaching Or Reaching?

Preaching serves to guide us how to live a life filled with peace and love for our fellow man, and to give us insights into the teachings of Christ. Sermons serve as a beacon of hope in a world shrouded in darkness, offering a pathway to salvation and reconciliation with God. The following could be controversial and it may offend you. We have to own what has been done from the pulpit and understand that our preaching has inflicted harm. This assertion may be contentious and could potentially cause offense, however it is crucial that we acknowledge this reality. It is evident that spiritual abuse

and manipulation have emerged from some of our pulpits, conferences, social media platforms, book publications and even Christian television programs, stemming from sermons that have not been meticulously studied and rooted in the Word of God and without accountability.

A prevalent issue within the church is the lack of biblical literacy. Pastors, evangelists, teachers, missionaries, professors and seminaries often fail to adequately impart the teachings of Scripture. In research by both Focus on the Family and Fuller Seminary, it was reported that 72% of pastors surveyed said they only studied the Bible when they were preparing for sermons or lessons. In another telling data point, 75% of pastors felt they were unqualified and/or poorly trained by their seminaries to lead and manage the church or to counsel others. This left them disheartened in their ability to pastor.

This is a spiritual responsibility we hold as leaders. Instead of meticulously examining the Word and its context, we often cherry-pick texts to construct sermons and presentations, spending more time trying to make sure our illustrated sermons look good with props, give our own stories and “prophecy” what we are feeling at that moment and use “God gave me a word” very loosely. This leads us astray from the true meaning of Scripture.

Unfortunately, this approach often does more harm than good, hindering rather than aiding individuals in building their faith in God’s Word. But more concerning to me is that we have a biblical literacy problem in our congregations. American churchgoers aren’t reading or studying the Bible on their own. If we are going to reach the world with the gospel, we must first take time to study and develop in the Word of God and create a lifestyle filled with prayer.

Christians claim to believe the Bible is God’s Word. We claim it is God’s divinely inspired, inerrant message to us. Yet

despite this, we aren't reading it. A recent LifeWay Research study found only 45% of those who regularly attend church read the Bible more than once a week. Over 40% of the people attending read their Bible occasionally, maybe once or twice a month. And almost one in five churchgoers say they *never read the Bible*. If we fail to recognize and comprehend the repercussions of what is happening, we will continue to fall short in fulfilling our duty to preach, teach and equip our congregations to spread the gospel effectively in the Great Commission. Thankfully there is one small sport of good news to be encouraged by, that if we make a small adjustment through starting and implementing small groups more consistently, it would aid in combating and changing the epidemic of biblical illiteracy. Let's hold each other accountable and help one another.

Reaching Or Preaching?

Yet, alongside preaching, there exists a profound call to reach out to others, to extend a hand of compassion and understanding. As Philippians 2:4 advises (MEV), "Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." This ethos of reaching emphasizes the importance of embodying the love and grace of Christ in our interactions with others. It involves meeting people where they are, listening with empathy and offering genuine care and support.

In our current cultural environment, characterized by division and polarization, the imperative to both preach and reach is more pressing than ever. We are called not only to articulate the truths of the gospel but also to live them out in our daily lives. This requires courage, humility and a willingness to engage with those who may hold differing beliefs or perspectives. If we can't be genuine and transparent, how can we hope to connect with those who are broken? I've noticed many Christians losing touch with the struggles of those who feel lonely, broken-hearted and burdened by painful, traumatic

experiences filled with deep sorrow and resentment.

Approaching people with a predetermined agenda, without investing in genuine relationships, only serves to push them further away. Our actions carry more weight than our words. If we want others to embrace the message we preach, we must exemplify it through our lives, making it worth following. Constant defensiveness exhausts both ourselves and those around us. There's too much blame-shifting and searching for faults, indicating that as a church we have much work to do in learning how to meet people where they are. This doesn't mean compromising our faith, morals or beliefs, rather in finding authentic ways to connect and empathize.

Both-And, Not Either-Or

Let's remind ourselves of the essence of our mission, ensuring that every word we speak and every action we take is infused with love and compassion, rather than any hint of hostility or militancy. This new generation isn't simply searching for another event to attend—they yearn for authentic community, akin to what we witness in the early church described in the book of Acts.

In Acts, the believers weren't just passive participants. They formed a tightly knit community, bonded by their shared devotion to Christ. They engaged in prayer, shared meals, enjoyed fellowship and gleaned invaluable insights from Jesus' teachings. Their unity wasn't confined to spiritual matters, they also met each other's practical needs, freely giving and receiving support, while bearing witness to the awe-inspiring miracles performed by the apostles.

Let's broaden our understanding of preaching and reaching. It is about embodying the very essence of our faith. Romans 12:13 urges us to actively contribute to the well-being of our fellow believers and to open our hearts and homes in hospitality. This verse underscores the ongoing journey of

faith, encouraging us to continually grow and extend the boundless love and grace of God to all, both in our words and our deeds. May we strive to cultivate communities of warmth and genuine love, reflecting the all-embracing compassion of Christ Himself. Let's build bridges of understanding and connection, inviting others to experience the transformative power of God's love in their lives.

Let me share a story that beautifully encapsulates the essence of our discussion. Imagine a weary traveler, lost in the darkness of a dense forest. He stumbles upon a fork in the road, unsure of which path to take. Suddenly, a light appears in the distance, drawing him closer. As he approaches, he hears the gentle voice of a guide offering directions and encouragement. This scene illustrates the interconnectedness of preaching and reaching. As Martin Luther King Jr. so eloquently stated, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." Our journey of faith often begins with uncertainty, but it is through preaching and reaching that we illuminate the path for others, guiding them toward the light of God's love.

Just as the weary traveler found hope in the midst of darkness, so too can we offer hope to those who are lost and searching. By embracing both preaching and reaching, we become beacons of light in a world that can often feel dim and foreboding.

Let us heed the words of Mother Teresa, who urged us to spread love wherever we go. For it is through acts of kindness and compassion that we extend God's love to those around us, leaving no one without the opportunity to experience the joy that comes from knowing they are cherished and valued.

In a world where acceptance feels elusive to many, it is vital to extend kindness and embody the Commandments, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength...Love your neighbor as yourself." These principles serve as guiding

lights, reminding us never to give in to weariness nor cease our efforts to love one another as profoundly as He first loves us.

In the end, it is not a matter of preaching or reaching—it is the harmonious blend of both, empowering Christ's body to share God's love with the world. So let us journey forth driven by faith and courage, knowing we have Holy Spirit power to make the differences in the lives of others, one heartfelt encounter at a time.

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