

The Supremacy of God in Preaching by John Piper, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1990 (28 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Missions Is for Sake of the Name of God

Young people today don't get fired up about denominations and agencies. They get fired up about the greatness of a global God, and about the unstoppable purpose of a sovereign King. The first great missionary said, "We have been given grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations" (Rom. 1 :5, emphasis added). Missions is for the sake of the name of God. It flows from a love for God's glory and for the honor of his reputation. It is an answer to the prayer, "Hallowed be thy name!" [Page 11]

2. God Himself the Subject of Preaching

God himself is the necessary subject matter of our preaching, in his majesty and truth and holiness and righteousness and wisdom and faithfulness and sovereignty and grace.' I don't mean we shouldn't preach about nitty-gritty, practical things like parenthood and divorce and AIDS and gluttony and television and sex. What I mean is that every one of those things should be swept up into the holy presence of God and laid bare to the roots of its Godwardness or godlessness. [Page 12]

... the subjective evidence of God's call to the ministry of the Word (to quote Charles Spurgeon) "is an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work."¹

1. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 26. [Page 18]

3. The Trinity Is the Meat of All Preaching

... the main theme: The Supremacy of God in Preaching. Its outline is intentionally trinitarian:

The Goal of Preaching: the Glory of God

The Ground of Preaching: the Cross of Christ

The Gift of Preaching: the Power of the Holy Spirit

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are the beginning, middle, and end in the ministry of preaching. Written over all ministerial labor, especially preaching, stand the words of the apostle: "From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever" (Rom. 11 :36). [Page 19]

4. The Aims and Ends of Preaching

The Scottish preacher James Stewart said the aims of all genuine preaching are "to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God. "²

². James Stewart, *Heralds of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 73. This quote comes from William Temple, who formulated it to define worship, but Stewart borrowed it as giving "precisely the aims and ends of preaching. [page 19]

4. Restore God's Throne and Dominion to Men

Cotton Mather, who ministered in New England 300 years ago, said, "The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men. "⁷

⁷. Cotton Mather, *Student and Preacher, or Directions for a Candidate of the Ministry* (London: Hindmarsh, 1726), v. [Page 22]

5. The Cross Is the Infinite Worth of God's Glory

It horribly skews the meaning of the cross when contemporary prophets of self-esteem say that the cross is a witness to my infinite worth, since God was willing to pay such a high price to get me. The biblical perspective is that the cross is a witness to the infinite worth of God's glory, and a witness to the immensity of the sin of my pride. What should shock us is that we have brought such contempt upon the worth of God that the very death of his Son is required to vindicate that worth. The cross stands in witness to the infinite worth of God and the infinite outrage of sin. [Page 32]

6. The Undercutting of Biblical Preaching

But it is not automatic that preaching will flourish where the Bible is believed to be inerrant. Among evangelicals today there are other effective ways for the power and authority of biblical preaching to be undercut. There are subjectivist epistemologies that belittle propositional revelation. There are linguistic theories that cultivate an exegetical atmosphere of ambiguity. There is a kind of popular, cultural relativism that enables people to dispense flippantly with uncomfortable biblical teaching. [Page 40]

7. Use Scripture to Support Preaching Points

One of the biggest problems I have with younger preachers I am called on to critique is that they fail to quote the texts that support the points they are making. It makes me wonder if they have been taught that you should get the drift of a text and then talk in your own words for thirty minutes. The effect of that kind of preaching is to leave people groping for the Word of God and wondering whether what you said is really in the Bible. [Page 41]

8. Be the Man of One Book

... Be like John Wesley in this matter of relying on the Spirit in his Word, the Bible. He said: "O give me that book! At any price give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book."³

³Quoted in John R. W Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 32. [Page 42]

9. Being Full of the Word of God

The really effective preachers have been ever growing in the Word of God. Their delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law they meditate day and night. Spurgeon said of John Bunyan, "Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his soul is full of the Word of God."⁵

⁵Quoted in Murray, Iain, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966), 34. [Page 43]

10. Gravity of Preaching

Intensity of feeling, the weight of argument, a deep and pervading solemnity of mind, a savor of the power of godliness, fervency of spirit, zeal for God--these are the marks of the "gravity of preaching." If there is one thing we can learn from Edwards, it is to take our calling seriously, not to, trifle with the Word of God and the act of preaching.

In Scotland a hundred years after Edwards, a hypocritical pastor named Thomas Chalmers was converted in his little parish of Kilmany. He became a powerful force for evangelicalism and for world missions from his pastorate in Glasgow and from his lectern at the University of St. Andrews and then Edinburgh. His fame and power in the pulpit were legendary in his lifetime.

Yet, according to James Stewart, Chalmers preached "with a disconcertingly provincial accent, with an almost total lack of dramatic gesture, tied rigidly to his manuscript, with his finger following the written lines as he read."⁵ Andrew Blackwood refers to Chalmers's "bondage to the manuscript and use of long sentences."⁶ What, then, was his secret? James Alexander who was teaching at Princeton at that time asked John Mason on his return from Scotland why Chalmers was so effective, and Mason replied, "It is his blood-earnestness."⁷

Stewart, *Heralds of God*, 102.

⁶Andrew W. Blackwood, ed., *The Protestant Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 311.

⁷James W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 264. [Page 50-51]

11. Preaching Is God's Securing Power for the Saints

Paul says in 2 Timothy 2: 10, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which in Christ Jesus goes with eternal glory." Labor on behalf of the elect, therefore, is not icing on the cake of their eternal security. It is God's appointed means of keeping them secure. Eternal security is a community project (Heb. 3:12-13) and preaching is part of God's securing power. He calls effectually by the Word and he keeps effectually by the Word. [Page 59]

12. Gladness and Gravity Woven Together

Surely every preacher should say, with all gravity, "Who is sufficient for these things"--to save sinners, to revive the church, to preserve the saints! So I repeat my thesis: Gladness and gravity should be woven together in the life and preaching of a pastor in such a way as to sober the careless soul and sweeten the burdens of the saints. Love for people cannot treat awesome realities lightly (hence, gravity), and love for people cannot load people with the burden of joyless obedience (hence, gladness). [Page 59]

13. Be Kind in All Things

You can't be blood-earnest in the pulpit and habitually flippant at the deacons' meeting and the church dinner. Nor can you display the glory of God in the gladness of your preaching if you are surly and dismal and unfriendly during the week. Don't strive to be a kind of preacher. Strive to be a kind of person! [Page 60]

14. Pray and Examine Self

Cotton Mather's rule was to stop at the end of every paragraph as he wrote his sermon to pray and examine himself and try to fix on his heart some holy impression of his subject.¹⁹

¹⁹ Quoted in Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 214. [Page 60-61]

15. Our Affections Respond Properly to God's Reality

When we speak of delight in God as our duty we must realize it is not a simple thing. One vigorous inclination in the human heart always must include others. Delight in the glory of God includes, for example, hatred for sin, fear of displeasing God, hope in the promises of God, contentment in the fellowship of God, desire for the final revelation of the Son of God, exultation in the redemption he accomplished, grief and contrition for failures of love, gratitude for undeserved benefits, zeal for the purposes of God, and hunger for righteousness. Our duty toward God is that all our affections respond properly to his reality and so reflect his glory. [Page 78]

16. Affections Are the Springs of All Godly Action.

Probably in our day someone would ask Edwards why he does not make external deeds of love and justice his goal rather than lust the affections of the heart. The answer is that he does make behavior his aim, namely, by aiming to transform the spring of behavior-the affections. He chooses this strategy for two reasons. One is that a good tree can't bear bad fruit. The longest section of *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* is devoted to proving this thesis: "Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice."⁵ Edwards aimed at the affections because they are the springs of all godly action. Make the tree good and its fruit will be good.

The other reason Edwards aimed to stir up holy affections is that "no external fruit is good, which does not proceed from such exercises."⁶ Outward acts of benevolence and piety which do not flow from the new and God-given affections of the heart, which delight to depend on God and seek his glory, are only legalism and have no value in honoring God. If you give your body to be burned and have not love it profits nothing (1 Cor. 13:3).

⁵Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, in *Banner* 1 :314

⁶*Ibid*, 1 :243. [Page 83-84].

17. Preaching Saturated with Scripture

... good preaching aims to enlighten the mind of the hearers with divine truth. It was a wonderful combination that God used to awaken New England 250 years ago: heat and light; burning and shining; head and heart; deep doctrine and deep delight.

.... good preaching is "saturated with Scripture" and not "based on Scripture" because Scripture is more (not less) than the basis for good preaching. Preaching that proclaims God's supremacy does not begin with Scripture as a basis and then wander off to other things. It oozes Scripture. [Page 86]

18. Well Acquainted with God's Word

To read Edwards is to read the Bible through the eyes of one who understands it deeply and feels it with all his heart. His preaching was saturated with Scripture. Ours should be as well. Let us follow Edwards's counsel to "be well studied in divinity, well acquainted with the written word of God [and] mighty in the Scriptures." ¹⁶

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, "The True Excellency of a Gospel Minister," Banner. 2:957. [Page 88]

19. Give Heed to Biblical Warnings and Persevere in Godliness

The use of threat or warning in preaching to the saints is rare today for at least two reasons: It produces guilt and fear, which are considered to be unproductive, and it seems theologically inappropriate because the saints are secure and don't need to be warned or threatened. Edwards rejected both reasons. When fear and guilt correspond with the true state of things it is reasonable and loving to stir them up. And the saints are only as secure as they are willing to give heed to biblical warnings and persevere in godliness. "Let him who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (I Cor. 10: 12). [Page 91]

20. Frighten People Away from Hell

Preaching about hell is never an end in itself. You can't frighten anyone into heaven. Heaven is for people who love purity, not for people who simply loathe pain. Nevertheless, Edwards said, "Some talk of it as an unreasonable thing to think to fright persons to heaven; but I think it is a reasonable thing to endeavor to fright persons away from hell--tis a reasonable thing to fright a person out of a house on fire." ²³

²³Jonathan Edwards, The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, in Yale, 4:248. [Page 92]

21. God Brings the Results

When we preach, to be sure, it is God who affects the results for which, we long. But that does not rule out earnest appeals for our people to respond. For as Edwards explains,

We are not merely passive, nor yet does God do some, and we do the rest. But God does all, and we do all. God produces all, and we act all. For that is what he produces, viz. our own acts. God is the only proper author and fountain; we only are the proper actors. We are, in different respects, wholly passive and wholly active.

In the Scriptures the same things are represented as from God and from us. God is said to convert [2 Tim. 2:25], and men are said to convert and turn [Acts 2:38]. God makes a new heart [Ezek. 36:26], and we are commanded to make us a new heart [Ezek. 18:31]. God circumcises the heart [Deut. 30:6], and we are commanded to circumcise our own hearts [Deut. 10: 16) ... These things are agreeable to that text, "God worketh in you both to will and to do [Phil. 2: 13]. "²⁶

²⁶Jonathan Edwards, Miscellaneous Remarks Concerning Efficacious Grace, in Banner, 2:557. [Page 94-95]

22. People Respond to God's Word through Good Preaching

... God has been pleased to give awakening power to preaching which does not shrink back from the loving threatenings of the Lord, and which lavishes the saints with incomparable promises of grace, and which pleads passionately and lovingly that no one hear the Word of God in vain. It is a tragedy to see pastors state the facts and sit down. Good preaching pleads with people to respond to the Word of God. [Page 95]

23. Depending on God's Mercy

The goal of preaching is utterly dependent on the mercy of God for its fulfillment. Therefore, the preacher must labor to put his preaching under divine influence by prayer. [Page 98]

24. Spiritual Power Not Synonymous with Loudness

Genuine spiritual power in the pulpit is not synonymous with loudness. Hard hearts are not likely to be broken by shrill voices. Edwards was persuaded from Scripture that "gracious affections do not tend to make men bold, forward, noisy, and boisterous; but rather to speak trembling. "⁴¹ The eye of divine blessing is upon the meek and trembling:

"This is the man to whom I will look [says the Lord], he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2).

⁴¹ Jonathan Edwards, A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, in Banner 1:308. [Page 101]

25. Preaching Comes from Brokenness and Tenderness

Edwards was described by Thomas Prince as "a preacher of a low and moderate voice, a natural way of delivery; and without any agitation of body, or anything else in the manner to excite attention; except his habitual and great solemnity, looking and speaking as in the presence of God." ⁴⁵He stands as a rare testimony to the truth that preaching that makes God supreme comes from a spirit of brokenness and tenderness. [Page 102]

26. Holiness and Eternity at Stake Every Sunday

Compelling [intense] preaching gives the impression that something very great is at stake. With Edwards's view of the reality of heaven and hell and the necessity of persevering in a life of holy affections and godliness, eternity was at stake every Sunday. This sets him apart from the average preacher today. [Page 103]

27. The Glory of God Is the Focus

The glory of God is of infinite worth. It is the heart of what the apostles preached: "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). It is the goal of every Christian act: "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

It is the focus of all Christian hope: "We rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). It will someday replace the sun and moon as the light of life: "The city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light" (Rev. 21 :23). And even now, before that great day, "the heavens are telling the glory of God" (ps. 19: 1). When people discover the worth of God's glory--when God says, "Let there be light," and opens the eyes of the blind--they are like people who find a treasure hidden in a field and, full of joy, sell all they have to buy that field. They are like Moses, who cried to the Lord, "I pray thee, show me thy glory" (Exod. 33: 18). [Page 107-108]

28. People Are Starving for God

Christian preachers, more than all others, should know that people are starving for God. If anyone in all the world should be able to say, "I have looked upon thee in the sanctuary, beholding thy power and glory," it is the herald of God. Who but preachers

will look out over the wasteland of secular culture and say, "Behold your God! "? Who will tell the people that God is great and greatly to be praised! Who will paint for them the landscape of God's grandeur! Who will remind them with tales of wonder that God has triumphed over every foe Who will cry out above every crisis, "Your God reigns! "? Who will labor to find words that can carry the "gospel of the glory of the blessed God"?
[Page 108-109]