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PREACHING THE CROSS

Since being appointed to my role as Director of the Cornhill Training Course in Spring 2016, and in preparation for writing this book, I have read some twenty to thirty books about preaching. Forty years ago, there simply wasn't that quantity of good, contemporary books to instruct us and sustain us in the task of preaching. Now, there are many in circulation and more coming off the printing press every year.

In my reading, I have realised that most of these books assume – and some positively argue for – a particular view of preaching.

The first widespread idea is that the word 'preaching' means 'giving sermons'. So the phrase 'preaching the cross' is roughly equivalent to 'giving sermons about the cross'. Perhaps most of us share that assumption. In the wake of such a notion may come a whole host of other expectations about the shape of a sermon (usually three points with alliterating headings), its style (perhaps caricatured as 'oral commentary'), its curriculum (usually sequential preaching through Bible books) and its length (specified by the conventions of our particular congregation). That's the assumption about the 'what' of preaching.

The second assumption concerns the 'where'. Such sermons are given 'to the church congregation, gathered (usually) on a Sunday'. They will normally happen in the place where our church meets each week, which might be a church building, or a hired school or community hall, or any one of a myriad of other possibilities ... but the home of preaching is the pulpit, lectern or stage at the front of the venue where our church normally meets, and from which the Sunday sermon is preached.

The majority of those listening will therefore be converted, usually church members only (or just a random small group of them who happen to be in attendance on any given week). Perhaps there may be some non-Christians there, but only in a tiny minority because if they were present in significant numbers, then the sermon would stop being 'preaching' and become 'evangelism'.

The third assumption is about the 'who' that preaches such sermons. Because they are done in the main Sunday gathering of a church, presumably the authorised church pastor-teacher or leader (or their assistant, or an occasional preacher, or someone invited by them) will normally be the person to give these sermons.

But are these assumptions right? When we talk about 'preaching the cross' how much of this mindset is appropriate? Are we really talking about the recognised church leader giving sermons about the cross to the Christian gathering? That's the question we are going to explore in this chapter.

'Preaching' vocabulary in the New Testament

Let's first consider what 'preaching' is.

This table lists three of the Greek verbs most frequently used in the New Testament for 'preaching'. There are more verbs used than just these three, but these are the most common.

Greek word	meaning	occurrence
<i>euangelizomai</i>	bring good news announce good news proclaim the gospel	54
<i>katangello</i>	proclaim announce	18
<i>kerysso</i>	announce make known proclaim aloud make proclamation as a herald	59

In contrast to the view that 'preaching' is something that happens primarily in the context of the church family, in the vast majority of cases where these words are used, they refer to something like pioneer evangelism, preaching to unbelievers.

The first word *euangelizomai* describes something that is done generally in a public context, and where the content is the gospel message (or some particular aspect of it).

There are two occasions where this 'evangelising' seems to be to believers (rather than to non-Christians) – in Luke 1:19, where Gabriel brings the good news of John the Baptist's ministry, and in Romans 1:15 where Paul wants to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome. But even these two uses are with an eye on the wider world (for John will turn the world back to God in repentance, and Paul wants to enlist the support of the Roman church for his mission to Spain). And there is one occurrence where 'good news' is definitely proclaimed to a Christian, as Timothy 'brings the good news' to Paul that the Thessalonians are 'standing firm' as Christians (1 Thess. 3:6).

Apart from these three (possible) exceptions, the direction of travel is clear: *euangelizomai* is about the proclamation of the gospel to the world. It is certainly not restricted to Christian gatherings. It happens to shepherds on the hillside above Bethlehem, in the region around Jordan amongst those listening to John, in a hostile synagogue in Nazareth, in cities and villages and 'other towns', in the temple and from house to house. It happens with an Ethiopian eunuch, to 'all the towns' a Christian traveller passes through, in place after place Paul journeyed, and all the way to Rome. It happens in Corinth, in Galatia, in Rome, and in the lands beyond Corinth, in any place where Christ had not already been named. And on and on.

Katangello follows a similar pattern: the context is public and the content is Christ and the gospel. Again, there are just a couple of exceptions: in Romans 1:8, the proclamation is of the Roman Christians' faith in all the

world, and in 1 Corinthians 11:26, the proclamation of the Lord's death is 'as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup', so that, as the Protestant Reformers claimed, the sacraments communicate the same gospel and promises as the written word, but in a different form, as 'visible words'. But two such exceptions test and prove the validity of the general rule: Christ and the gospel is publicly proclaimed.

Kerysso is perhaps best paraphrased as an 'announcing' since the word carries both the idea of the act of the announcing and the content of what is announced. 'In the vast majority of these instances, the context of the proclamation is a public one ... almost uniformly, the substance of the message proclaimed where *kerysso* is used is the gospel message and its implications (or, more broadly, the teaching of or about Jesus)'¹.

Surveying all these 131 occasions of 'preaching', I am not persuaded that any of them can be securely tied, uniquely to the Christian assembly, as we might assume. In fact, it would seem that New Testament preaching finds its natural context in the unbelieving world. Preaching is what you do to proclaim the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ to nations in darkness. That is not a reason to abandon preaching within the Christian assembly, but there seems little evidence that it is to be particularly in church.

1 Jonathan Griffiths: *Preaching in the New Testament* (IVP, 2017) p. 32.