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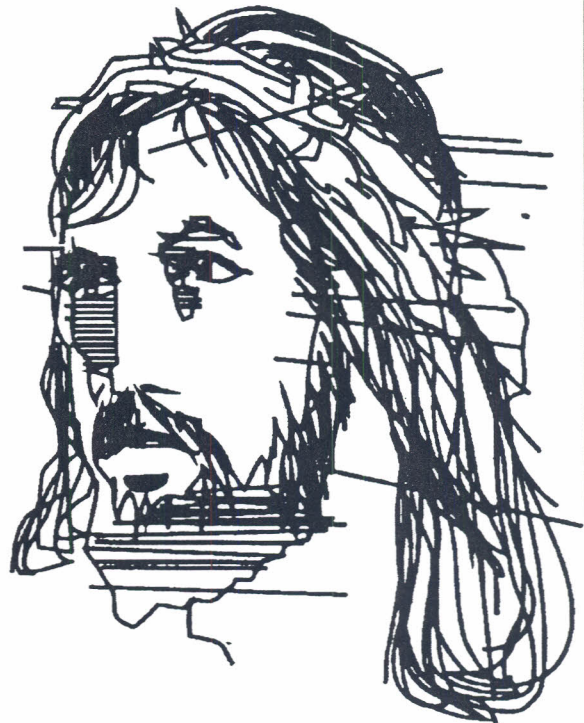
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What it Means to Preach JESUS



By James S. Woodroof



It was the darkest day of my life. I had never been aware of depression in my brief thirty-four years. But on that dark day in 1966, I experienced depression. I was ten thousand miles from home, supported by the 6th and Izard church of Little Rock, Arkansas, to plant the church in Christchurch, New Zealand. Having grown up in a Christian home, son of a preacher, nearing the end of my master's degree, with fifteen years of preaching experience, I was shocked to realize that *I didn't know what I was supposed to be preaching!* A dark day, indeed; but it was the beginning of a richly rewarding search for the heart of God and the answer to my question: "What have I been called to preach?"

A preacher once stepped to the podium and saw on the pulpit a note which read, "Sir, we would see Jesus." Five simple words requesting an audience with Jesus of Nazareth. The initial request was made out of curiosity by some out-of-town guests visiting Jerusalem during one of the annual Jewish holidays. Two thousand years later the request lying on the pulpit was made, more than likely, out of frustration over hearing too many subjects preached *other* than Jesus. Every sermon should allow the hearer to "see" Jesus: see what he saw, feel what he felt, think what he thought, "hear his voice," so that Jesus might "come in and eat with him" (Rev 3:20). "We would see Jesus" should be the reference point of every sermon—spoken, written, or lived. Stripped to the bone, preaching Jesus means the hearer/reader/observer will *see Jesus*—up close and personal.

Nothing else could possibly satisfy the request by the tourists in A.D. 30 or the writer of the anonymous note nearly twenty centuries later.

When Jesus is preached, Jesus himself is the message, not the church nor social issues nor morality—though these worthy subjects will issue from preaching Jesus just as fruit issues from root. Jesus is the root message! Jesus! Not politics or psychology or a preacher's pet peeve. To "preach Jesus" means just that—*preach Jesus*. Like Paul, who decided to preach nothing to the Corinthians but "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2), Oswald Chambers charged:

Restate to yourself what you believe . . . then do away with as much of it as possible, and get back to the bedrock of the Cross of Christ. . . . If we get away from brooding on the tragedy of God upon the Cross in our preaching, it produces nothing. It does not convey the energy of God to man; it may be interesting but it has no power. But preach the Cross, and the energy of God is let loose. . . . We preach Christ crucified.¹

But what is the method of proclamation which so lifts up Jesus that all else is left aside, and speaker and hearer alike are ushered into the presence of the God-Man? There must be a door of access which gives audience to him. Admittedly, any attempt to analyze "preaching Jesus" runs the

same risk as a scientist who attempts to analyze a tear. Citing lab data showing a tear's composition as H₂O (water) and NaCl (sodium chloride) is inadequate. A tear is more than water and salt, and preaching Jesus will always be more than what one could write *about* it.

"Preaching Jesus" will possess the same dynamic it possessed when Jesus himself personally lived out the message. Obviously, this claim has limitations, but only in degree, not in kind. The dynamic at work in Jesus' hearers *then* must also be allowed to work in all who hear him today. And that dynamic centers around his *identity*. In all of Jesus' interaction with people, he seems to have been initially and ultimately (and almost exclusively) concerned that people grasp his identity—who he was. It was central to all he said and did.

He asked his disciples, for example, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matt 16:13). They told him what they had heard (6:14). He pressed them further: "And who do *you* say I am?" (16:15). Peter responded: "You are the Christ. . . ." (16:16). Jesus declared that Peter's answer had been given him from the Father (16:17)—the strongest possible endorsement he could have given Peter's reply. He proceeded to assert that his church would be built on the rock of his identity (16:18). He was bold enough to predict, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he" (John 8:28), and brave enough, when asked under cross-examination, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" to answer, "I am" (Mark 14:62).

Particularly in John's gospel, Jesus constantly fields such questions as, "Who are you?" and "Who do you think you are?" (John 8:53), and "How long do you hold us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" (10:24). Pilate asked, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (18:33) to which Jesus answered, "For this cause I was born, and for this reason I have come into the world. I must bear witness to the truth" (18:37). And did he ever! Jesus made over 150 claims in which, directly or indirectly, he declared his deity.² It was this upon which he staked everything: "Unless you believe that I am [the Messiah], you will die in your sins" (John 8:24), and for which he himself was "staked." He was adamant about it! So much so that a strident critic eighteen hundred years later picked up on it and said this about him:

According to the first three Gospels, [Jesus] knew God as his Father and God's affairs as his own. . . . According to John, he articulated positively his unity with the Father and presented himself as the visible revelation of him. In any case according to both representations this was neither a mere feigning nor a

transient surge of Jesus' feeling in single heightened moments; rather his entire life and all his sayings and actions were permeated with this consciousness as from the soul.³

So, Jesus' identity was no peripheral issue; it occupied center stage in his mind and ministry, in the preaching and writings of his followers, and in the critiques of his adversaries, both then and now. Should not his identity, then, be the dominant theme when we preach him today?

Specifically, however, to preach Jesus means to preach his identity in such a manner as to induce *crisis*, call for *decision*, and expect unreserved *commitment*. It is more than just the telling of fascinating stories of his life, as one would tell a bedtime story to a child. It is the proclaiming of Jesus as the object of intense scrutiny by his contemporaries in a drama that escalated until the question of his identity was finally resolved. Many concluded, "He's the Messiah," and they worshipped him; others concluded, "He's an impostor," and they killed him. Preaching Jesus today will call hearers to the same dilemma, the "dilemma of his deity"—that is, either Jesus was an egotistical maniac guilty of blasphemy, or he was the divine Son of God. This dilemma must be addressed by every hearer today—and resolved. Until it is, nothing else matters.

Jesus' own personal method of bringing people to this dilemma was consistent from beginning to end: he placed his hearers in the breach between 1) *what they could hardly believe* (his astonishing claims) and 2) *what they could not reasonably deny* (his phenomenal deeds).⁴ The gospel records demonstrate this method both generally and specifically. It can be seen generally in that each gospel weaves the story about Jesus from a body of evidence consisting of "things difficult to believe" and "things impossible to deny," thus creating an increasing tension between the two until the reader is brought face to face with the issue of Jesus' identity.⁵ Is he or is he not who he claimed to be?

It can be seen specifically in the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12), in which Jesus intentionally placed his adversaries in the bind between his *claim* to forgive sins and his *healing* of the paralytic.⁶ His claim they could not believe; his healing they could not deny. Thus their dilemma. He brought them there by design: " 'That you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .' He said to the paralytic, 'Take up your pallet and go home.' And he rose . . . and went out before them all" (Mark 2:10–12). And Jesus left them there to struggle.

Critics have picked up on Jesus' method of operation. A modern, twentieth-century adversary detected the "bind" in which Jesus caught his Jewish antagonists and charged

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Jesus with being “the comprehensive engineer of his own execution”:

Jesus, knowing full well what he was doing, had quite deliberately forced [the council] . . . by his skillfully planned and calculated activities. . . . He had himself made doubly sure that they would proceed to extremes against him by goading them with his words and behavior, so that any possible mitigation of their severity would be offset by the personal animus he had intentionally created.⁷

If even adversaries are conscious of both Jesus’ claims to deity *and* his method of bringing his hearers to grapple with this issue, should not this also be the crux of our preaching—if we preach Jesus? There can be no *submission to* his deity without, first, *admission of* his deity.

But what does preaching Jesus mean to those who hear? That depends on the hearers—those who are listening.

So who is out there? The preacher addresses people with layers and layers of alienation. . . . The gathered congregation includes those who are profoundly burdened with guilt, whose lives are framed by deep wrong, by skewed relations beyond resolve, shareholders in the public drama of brutality and exploitation.⁸

Such suppliants have every right to hear Jesus preached! In such hearers there is a yearning for release—a yearning “that causes people to dress up in their heaviness and present themselves for the drama one more time. Sunday morning is, for some, a last, desperate hope. . . .”⁹ These people have the right to hear Jesus preached—to experience, perhaps, what the psalmist was attempting to convey when he said, “Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in” (Ps 24:7). To hear Jesus preached lifts up the head and opens the gates of the heart and allows the King of glory to come in.

Those who hear Jesus preached should feel like the woman who told the preacher, “You make Jesus seem like he was here just yesterday, and I missed him by twenty-four hours.” In fact, Jesus *is* timeless; he is as comfortable in the twenty-first century as in the first. “Jesus Christ is

the same yesterday, and today and forever” (Heb 13:8). Those who hear Jesus preached will get the distinct impression that he is not only timeless, but *timely*; an ever-present breath of fresh air. A student from mainland China sat in the Gospel of John class for several weeks studying the life of Jesus. Impressed, he could restrain himself no longer. He raised his hand and remarked with a sense of awe, “I feel like the windows of my mind have been opened, and a breath of fresh air is blowing through it.”

Sometimes Jesus seems too fresh, too challenging. The longer we gaze at him, the more intense the struggle, the greater the cost, the more escalated the battle for the heart. Once past the curiosity stage—past the first frontiers of information into the rugged ranges of confrontation, the hearer may become frightened and want to turn back.

There is an aspect of Jesus that chills the heart of a disciple to the core and makes the whole spiritual life gasp for breath. This strange Being with His face “set like a flint” and His striding determination, strikes terror into me. He is no longer Counselor and Comrade, He is taken up with a point of view I know nothing about and I am amazed at Him. At first I was confident that I understood Him, but now I am not so sure. I begin to realize that there is a distance between Jesus and me; I can no longer be familiar with him. He is ahead of me and he never turns round; I have no idea where he is going, and the goal has become strangely far off.¹⁰

And so, when Jesus is preached, struggle is induced. And so he meant it to be. On one occasion great multitudes followed him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:25–27). These hard words were spoken intentionally.

Elton Trueblood admits that Jesus’ presence is downright unsettling, saying, “After nearly two thousand years, [Jesus] is still the Great Disturber. To this day it is difficult to read his words and still be satisfied with one’s own life.”¹¹ Adolph Harnack agreed:

[W]e may take up what relation to him we will: in the history of the past no one can refuse to recognize that it was he who raised humanity to this [highest] level. . . . Once more let it be said: we may assume what position we will in regard to him and his message,

certain it is that thence onward the value of our race is enhanced.¹²

Indeed it is! The world has not been the same since. What a depraved predicament this planet would be in had Jesus not lived! What light there is in this dark world shines because he lived and lives. How sorely the world still needs to hear him; how eagerly we need to proclaim him; how reluctantly, anything else. How unique his personality, his power, his presence. He is solid reality: his is the highest calling, the surest vision, the brightest hope, the noblest ethic, the broadest appeal, the clearest path, the safest road. He is, indeed, the “way, the truth, and the life.” No one can come to the Father except by him.

Do whatever it takes to help your hearers see Jesus. 1) Immerse yourself in the gospel records. Read them and re-read them until you own them and they own you. Hold to the gospels as a wheel holds to its hub, that is, as the center of the whole and that to which all else is attached. Also, saturate yourself with the apostolic letters in which the Spirit reflects on the implications of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Be knowledgeable in the prophets. Read everything, both new and old, on his life and times. Read both friend and foe, avid champion and avowed critic, one and all.

2) Go to Israel (borrow the money, if necessary), walk the streets, see the sights, endure the smells, enjoy the food, experience the culture, observe the customs. (Many of them haven’t changed since Jesus himself lived there.) Then, come back home and speak out, not about the trip, but about Jesus. Your preaching will take on a dimension and a color unimagined by those who have not made such a trek.

3) Become proficient in the Greek language. Give whatever time it takes to know the language the Spirit used to record Jesus’ life and thought. Knowing Greek allows one to walk through yet another door instead of peering through a window, and allows one’s hearers to catch a glimpse of Jesus’ glory that otherwise might escape unnoticed.

Experience the above until Jesus oozes from the very pores of your spiritual skin . . . until you exude the aroma of Christ . . . until you see through his eyes, hear with his ears; think his thoughts, pray his prayers, live his life and, should the times require, die his death. Track him until you are caught by him and can’t escape. Know with John Baillie

that in fact it is the constraint of Jesus Christ from which I find it most impossible to escape. I just cannot read the Gospel story without knowing that I am being sought out in love, that I am at the same time being called to life’s most sacred task and being

offered life’s highest prize. For it is the love God has shown me in Christ that constrains me to the love of my fellow man. If there be someone who is aware of no such constraint, I cannot, of course, hope to make him aware of it by speaking these few sentences. That would require, not so much a more elaborate argument as something quite different from any argument. But I am not now arguing. I am only confessing.¹³

I, too, am only confessing. I know few certainties. But one thing I do know: “No one who puts his trust in [Jesus] will ever have cause to be ashamed” (Rom 10:11). But rather, like John who, seeing Jesus in all his glory standing among the golden candlesticks, fell on his face as one dead (Rev 1:17), so we, as we come to see him more and more intimately, will fall on our faces in worship and praise. Then, when that high hour arrives and we take our place before the hearers, we will be prepared to usher in those who come saying, “Sir, we would see Jesus,” for we ourselves will have seen him and, through us, so will those who hear.

JAMES S. WOODROOF is an author and much-loved preacher of the gospel who, for half a century, has centered his message in Jesus.

Notes

¹ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest* (Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1963), 330.

² See James S. Woodroof, *Between The Rock and a Hard Place* (Searcy, AR: The Bible House, 1989), 143–156.

² David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 800.

³ Woodroof, 44–47.

⁴ This particular method is especially dominant in the gospel of John. Some scholars believe that the Synoptics record this quandary as a “given,” and place this identity dilemma in other contexts or treat it as background for other specific purposes peculiar to their gospel account. For further study, see Robert Stein, *The Synoptic Problem* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987); David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

⁵ See also John 3:2, 3:16–19, 28–30, 39–42; 7:25–31; 9:13–34; 10:19–21, 10:30–38; 14:11.

⁶ Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1965), 137.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Chambers, 75.

¹⁰ Elton Trueblood, *A Place To Stand* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 55.

¹¹ Adolph Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 68.

¹² John Baillie, *A Reasoned Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 118–9.