

How The Bible Distinguishes Between Preaching And Teaching¹

People sometimes characterize a particular preacher as a better teacher than a preacher. While different people may mean different things in describing someone as a preacher or teacher, many people today generally think of preaching as speaking forcefully, having a ready command of scripture, making application and using illustrations, and then exhorting people to follow biblical concepts. By teaching, many people today mean presenting a passage of scripture, commenting upon it, and making explanations to make the meaning of the biblical passage clear. Of course, some overlapping of preaching and teaching is generally acknowledged.

However, this characterization generally has more to do with modern notions or what constitutes preaching and teaching than with the way the Bible uses the terms for preaching and teaching. The primary meaning associated with the nature of preaching in the New Testament comes from the fact that the Greek word most frequently used to describe a preacher was that of a herald. A herald was one who announced a message, generally from the king or some other ruling authority, to those who had not heard it before. Preaching in New Testament times therefore related primarily to **announcing** good news. In the New Testament, the content of that good news centered around the themes of Jesus, Christ, the word, the gospel, and the kingdom.

On the other hand the nature of teaching in New Testament times was primarily to explain ideas and their implications, and to exhort people to live by declared values. Whereas the message **preached** was the message announced, the message **taught** was the message explained, clarified, and applied, with exhortation to live by it. Whereas the message preached (announced) was primarily for the purpose of conversion, the message taught (explained, clarified, applied, with exhortation) was primarily for the purpose of building faith, Christian conviction and character.

Essentially, preaching lays the foundation for teaching, just as an announcement lays the foundation for further comments. Both have the same message. Their points of emphasis differ. Whereas the content of preaching may be narrowly defined, the content of teaching is in broad terms. Whereas the Great Commission in Matthew requires that we “make disciples,” Mark declares that we are to “preach the gospel” (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15). Matthew builds upon this, however, to say that after disciples have been made, we are to be “teaching them all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” Paul’s work in Rome is described as “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31). Paul himself used these concepts of preaching and teaching when he said, “Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (Colossians 1:28). The pattern is consistent – preaching (making announcement) precedes teaching (explanation, clarification, application, exhortation).

However, this distinction between preaching (as announcement to the unconverted) and teaching (as explanation, clarification, application, and exhortation to those already informed) even in New Testament times, was not always clear. Sometimes, people spoke interchangeably about the practice of teaching and preaching. Thus, whereas Matthew 4:23 declares that Jesus was “teaching in the synagogues;” Mark and Luke indicate that he was “preaching” (Mark 1:39, Luke 4:44). In Jerusalem, the same apostles who were “proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” were at the same time “teaching the people” (Acts 4:2). Whereas the term preaching consistently refers to the message announced, the term teaching may have people as its object.

In Antioch, the work of Paul and Barnabas is described as “teaching and preaching the word of the Lord” (Acts 15:35). Since teaching is mentioned before preaching in this verse, it may be that the major emphasis of their work at this place and time was in teaching the brethren while their secondary emphasis was on preaching to the unconverted. In any case, preaching and teaching go together. He who preaches (announces to the unconverted) also generally teaches (explains, clarifies, applies, and exhorts those who are already familiar with what has already been announced).

Like most preachers, Paul seems, during his lifetime, to have had his greatest success as a teacher. He continued a year and six months at Corinth “teaching the word of God among them”

¹Copyright © by author, Robert L. Waggoner, 1999; slightly revised, 2003. Permission is granted to duplicate and distribute this manuscript, if unchanged, for non-commercial educational purposes. All other rights reserved.

How The Bible Distinguishes Between Preaching And Teaching

(Acts 18:11). Paul apparently stayed longer at Ephesus than in any other city. His ministry there was primarily that of teaching at the school of Tryannus. Because he taught two years at that school “all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). That experience may or may not have been on Paul’s mind when he wrote to Timothy that “the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

In serving as God’s spokesmen, whether in congregations, schools, or as missionaries in foreign countries, and whether we are primarily announcing the good news or explaining, clarifying, applying and exhorting those who have already heard it, we need to be involved in both preaching and teaching the word of the Lord.