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Biblical Authority and the Preacher

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The inaugural issue of *Christianity Today*, dated October 15, 1956, featured an article by Billy Graham entitled, “Biblical Authority in Evangelism.” The thrust of the article was clear — without an unhesitant “thus saith the Lord” authority in preaching and evangelism, the message lacks all authority. The only authority that matters, Dr. Graham insisted, was the authority of the Bible as the Word of God.

Indeed, this confidence in biblical authority was, at least in part, the reason for the establishment of *Christianity Today* as the flagship journal of American evangelicalism under the editorship of Carl F. H. Henry.

Now, over a half-century after the publication of that article, Angie Ward of *Leadership* magazine began with Dr. Graham’s article and then asked five preachers — What, if anything,

has changed?

I was pleased to answer her questions and to participate in the project. She also interviewed David Anderson, pastor of Bridgeway Community Church in Columbia, Maryland; John M. Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in downtown Chicago and editor and publisher of *The Christian Century*; Tullian Tchividjian, a grandson of Billy Graham and the senior pastor at New City Church in Margate, Florida; and Rick Warren, founding pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California.

Her article, “Biblical Authority & Today’s Preacher,” is based on those interviews. The preachers interviewed represent something of a cross-section of American Protestantism, with John Buchanan representing liberal Protestantism and its most historic publication, *The Christian Century* (the very magazine to which *Christianity Today* was established to serve as an alternative)..

Suggesting the Old Testament prophets as models for preaching, Dr. Graham had referred to preachers as “mouthpieces for God.” The magazine then asked if we should consider today’s preacher to be a mouthpiece for God.

I answered:

I am certainly supposed to be a mouthpiece for Scripture, a human instrument through which the Scripture is heard and received by God’s people. But the human preacher’s authority only reaches the human ear. It is only God himself who can take his word from the human ear to the human heart.

I stand by this answer, and by the large comments I made in the interview about the fact that the preacher is actually a mouthpiece for God *only* when the Word of God is rightly preached. As the Reformers made clear, preaching is the means by which God speaks to His people as a gathered community. Through the preached Word and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, God actually speaks to His people.

Dr. John Buchanan answered:

We need to be very careful about that. So many people have abused this, preachers need to be very careful before

claiming they are God's mouthpiece. I think the preacher needs to be suggestive and not declarative. There are times in history when people (like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King) were called with some authority to say, "This is wrong." But we need to be cautious. One of our central doctrines is that we all fall short of the glory of God. Sin touches all of us. Our call is to study, pray, discern the word, then convey it to people.

The key issue here is his proposal that preaching should be "suggestive and not declarative." While the preacher must be modest concerning himself, his own abilities, and his inherent inadequacies, the preacher must not be merely suggestive in the pulpit. The "suggestive and not declarative" approach well defines most liberal Protestant preaching, but I think it also explains the decline of those churches and denominations. The earlier loss of confidence in the authority of the Bible inevitably leads to a declining authority of the pulpit.

As Martin Luther remarked, "Yes, I hear the sermon; but who is speaking? The minister? No indeed! You do not hear the minister. True, the voice is his; but my God is speaking the Word which he preaches or speaks. Therefore I should honor the Word of God that I may become a good pupil of the Word."

Luther source: *Luther's Works*, vol. 47, p. 229.

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