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The State of Preaching Today

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In surveying the current state of preaching, my primary concern is for preaching in the evangelical churches of North America. In these circles, preaching is generally considered to be an important part of worship and church life. Furthermore, it is generally understood to be the chief means of instructing the congregation in the Word of God and in presenting the claims of Christ. Even so, there appears to be little consensus about what preaching is to be in terms of shape, structure, substance, and subject matter. This confusion is readily seen when attending conferences on preaching or in listening to preachers talk about their own understanding of the task.

Signs of encouragement include a large number of younger evangelical pastors who are unabashedly committed to biblical exposition and represent a resurgence of genuine biblical exposition from the pulpits of churches situated in every part of the country, from the inner city to the suburbs and beyond. This new generation is proving once again that the effective and faithful exposition of the Word of God draws persons to Christ and leads to spiritual growth and to the health of the church. A generation of young ministers, along with others making their way through college and seminary education, may point toward a renaissance of biblical preaching in coming years.

On the other hand, several trends represent issues of genuine concern. In the main, the last few decades have been a period of wanton experimentation in many pulpits and preaching has often been redefined and reconceived as something other than the exposition and application of the biblical text.

1. A Loss of Confidence in the Power of the Word.

Contemporary Americans are surrounded by more words than any previous generation in human history. We are bombarded with words delivered to us in every conceivable form—sung, broadcast, electrified, printed, and spoken. Words have been digitalized, commercialized, and subjected to postmodern linguistic theories.

Taken together, all this amounts to a significant loss of confidence in the word as written and spoken. Several years

ago, the photographer Richard Avedon declared that “images are fast replacing words as our primary language.”

This certainly appears to be the case. In *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word*, author Mitchell Stephens of New York University argues that “the image is replacing the word as the predominant means of mental transport.”

Since preaching is itself a form of “mental transport,” any loss of confidence in the word leads to a loss of confidence in preaching. Ultimately, preaching will cease to be *Christian* preaching if the preacher loses confidence in the authority of the Bible as the Word of God and in the power of the spoken word to communicate the saving and transforming message of the Bible. The preacher must stand up and speak with confidence, declaring the Word of God to a congregation that is bombarded with hundreds of thousands of words each week, many of them delivered with a soundtrack or moving images. The audacious claim of Christian preaching is that the faithful declaration of the Word of God, spoken through the preacher’s voice, is even more powerful than anything music or image can deliver.

2. An Infatuation With Technology

Jacques Ellul was truly prophetic when he pointed to the rise of technology and technique as one of the greatest challenges to Christian faithfulness in our times. We live in a day of technological hubris and the ubiquity of technological assistance. We are engaged in few tasks, physical or mental, which are now unassisted by some form of technology.

For most of us, the use of these technologies comes with little attentiveness to how the technology reshapes the task and the experience. The same is true for preachers who have rushed to incorporate visual technology and media in the preaching event.

The effort is no doubt well intended, driven by a missiological concern to reach persons whose primary form of “mental transport” has become visual. Thus, preachers use clips from films, dynamic graphics, and other eye-catching technologies to gain and hold the congregation’s attention.

The danger of this approach is seen in the fact that the visual very quickly overcomes the verbal. Beyond this, the visual is often directed towards a very narrow slice of human experience, particularly focused on the affective and emotional aspects of our perception. Movies *move* us by the skillful manipulation of emotion, driven by soundtrack and manipulated by skillful directing techniques.

This is exactly where the preacher must not go. The power of the Word of God, spoken through the human voice, is seen in the Bible’s unique power to penetrate all dimensions of the human personality. As God made clear, even in the Ten Commandments, He has chosen to be *heard* and not *seen*. The use of visual technologies threatens to confuse this basic fact of biblical faith.

3. An Embarrassment Before the Biblical Text

Through the experience of hearing innumerable sermons from evangelical preachers, I note the tendency of some to appear rather embarrassed before the biblical text. The persistent attacks upon biblical authority and the sensitivities of our times have taken a toll on the preacher’s confidence in the actual text of the Bible.

On the theological left, the answer is quite simple—just discard the text and write it off as patriarchal, oppressive, and completely unacceptable in light of an updated concept of God.

Among evangelicals, we can be thankful that fewer preachers are willing to dismiss or discard the text as sub-biblical or warped by ancient prejudices. Instead, many of these preachers simply disregard and ignore vast sections of Scripture, focusing instead on texts that are more comfortable, palatable, and nonconfrontational to the modern mind. This is a form of pastoral neglect and malpractice, corrected only by a comprehensive embrace of the Bible—all of it—as the inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God. *All* of it is for our good.

4. An Evacuation of Biblical Content

The last point was concerned with passages of Scripture that are never preached—but what about the texts that are preached? Are today’s preachers actually studying for the content of the passage? In far too many cases, it seems that the

text becomes a point of departure for some message—no doubt well intended—which the pastor wishes to share with the congregation. Beyond this, the text of Scripture is often evacuated of biblical content when, regardless of a passage’s textual form or context, the content is uniformly presented as a set of pithy “points” that come together in a staple outline form.

Every text does have a point, of course. The preacher’s main concern should be to communicate that central truth, and design the sermon to serve that overarching purpose. Furthermore, the content of the passage is to be applied to life—but application must be determined by exposition, not vice versa.

Another problem that leads to an evacuation of biblical content is a loss of the “big picture” of Scripture. Far too many preachers give inadequate attention to the canonical context of the passage to be preached and of its place in the overarching story of God’s purpose to glorify Himself through the redemption of sinners. Taken out of context, and without clear attention to biblical theology, preaching becomes a series of disconnected talks on disconnected texts. This falls far short of the glory of true biblical preaching.

5. An Absence of Gospel

The preaching of the apostles *always* presented the kerygma—the heart of the gospel. The clear presentation of the Gospel must be a part of the sermon, no matter the text. As Charles Spurgeon expressed this so eloquently, preach the Word, place it in its canonical context, and “make a bee-line to the cross.”

The approach of many churches—and preachers—has been to present helpful and practical messages, often with generalized Christian content, but without any clear presentation of the Gospel or call to decision and accountability to the text or to the claims of Christ. The apostles should be our model here, consistently preaching the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of course, in order for the Gospel to make sense, authentic preaching must also deal honestly with the reality of human sin and must do so with a candor equal to that of the biblical text. All this presents the preacher with some significant challenges in our age of “sensitivities.” But in the end, preaching devoid of this content—preaching that evades the biblical text and biblical truth—falls short of anything we can rightly call *Christian* preaching.

These are indeed the best of times and the worst of times. I am thankful for a renaissance of expository preaching, especially among many young preachers. I am thankful for stalwart pulpit examples who now serve as mentors to a generation hungry to see how biblical exposition constitutes the very center of effective and powerful ministry. I am thankful for a number of outstanding programs in seminaries directed towards encouraging and equipping this generation for that task.

At the same time, I am also concerned that dangerous trends and many popular examples threaten to undermine the centrality of biblical exposition in evangelical pulpits. In the end, the Christian preacher simply must confront the congregation with the Word of God. That confrontation will be at times awkward, challenging, and difficult. After all, this is the Word that pierces us like a sword. The evangelical preacher must set his aim at letting the sword loose, neither hiding it nor dulling its edge.

