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The Urgency of Preaching

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How did this happen? Given the central place of preaching in the New Testament church, it would seem that the priority of biblical preaching should be uncontested. After all, as John A. Broadus—one of the great preachers of Christian history—famously remarked, “Preaching is characteristic of Christianity. No other religion has made the regular and frequent assembling of groups of people, to hear religious instruction and exhortation, an integral part of Christian worship.”

Yet, numerous influential voices within evangelicalism suggest that the age of the expository sermon is now past. In its place, some contemporary preachers now substitute messages intentionally designed to reach secular or superficial congregations—messages which avoid preaching a biblical text, and thus avoid a potentially embarrassing confrontation with biblical truth.

A subtle shift visible at the onset of the twentieth century has become a great divide as the century ends. The shift from expository preaching to more topical and human-centered approaches has grown into a debate over the place of Scripture in preaching, and the nature of preaching itself.

Two famous statements about preaching illustrate this growing divide. Reflecting poetically on the urgency and centrality of preaching, the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter once remarked, “I preach as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.” With vivid expression and a sense of gospel gravity, Baxter understood that preaching is literally a life or death affair. Eternity hangs in the balance as the preacher proclaims the Word.

Contrast that statement to the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, perhaps the most famous (or infamous) preacher of this century’s early decades. Fosdick, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, provides an instructive contrast to the venerable Baxter. “Preaching,” he explained, “is personal counseling on a group basis.”

These two statements about preaching reveal the contours of the contemporary debate. For Baxter, the promise of heaven and the horrors of hell frame the preacher’s consuming burden. For Fosdick, the preacher is a kindly counselor offering helpful advice and encouragement.

The current debate over preaching is most commonly explained as an argument about the focus and shape of the sermon. Should the preacher seek to preach a biblical text through an expository sermon? Or, should the preacher direct the sermon to the “felt needs” and perceived concerns of the hearers?

Clearly, many evangelicals now favor the second approach. Urged on by devotees of “needs-based preaching,” many evangelicals have abandoned the text without recognizing that they have done so. These preachers may eventually get to the text in the course of the sermon, but the text does not set the agenda or establish the shape of the message.

Focusing on so-called “perceived needs” and allowing these needs to set the preaching agenda inevitably leads to a loss of biblical authority and biblical content in the sermon. Yet, this pattern is increasingly the norm in many evangelical pulpits. Fosdick must be smiling from the grave.

Earlier evangelicals recognized Fosdick's approach as a rejection of biblical preaching. An out-of-the-closet theological liberal, Fosdick paraded his rejection of biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility—and rejected other doctrines central to the Christian faith. Enamored with trends in psychological theory, Fosdick became liberal Protestantism's happy pulpit therapist. The goal of his preaching was well captured by the title of one of his many books, *On Being a Real Person*.

Shockingly, this is now the approach evident in many evangelical pulpits. The sacred desk has become an advice center and the pew has become the therapist's couch. Psychological and practical concerns have displaced theological exegesis and the preacher directs his sermon to the congregation's perceived needs.

The problem is, of course, that the sinner does not know what his most urgent need is. She is blind to her need for redemption and reconciliation with God, and focuses on potentially real but temporal needs such as personal fulfillment, financial security, family peace, and career advancement. Too many sermons settle for answering these expressed needs and concerns, and fail to proclaim the Word of Truth.

Without doubt, few preachers following this popular trend intend to depart from the Bible. But under the guise of an intention to reach modern secular men and women "where they are," the sermon has been transformed into a success seminar. Some verses of Scripture may be added to the mix, but for a sermon to be genuinely biblical, the text must set the agenda as the foundation of the message—not as an authority cited for spiritual footnoting.

Charles Spurgeon confronted the very same pattern of wavering pulpits in his own day. Some of the most fashionable and well-attended London churches featured pulpiteers who were the precursors to modern needs-based preachers. Spurgeon—who managed to draw a few thousand hearers each service despite his insistence on biblical preaching—confessed, "The true ambassador for Christ feels that he himself stands before God and has to deal with souls in God's stead as God's servant, and stands in a solemn place—a place in which unfaithfulness is inhumanity to man as well as treason to God."

Spurgeon and Baxter understood the dangerous mandate of the preacher, and were therefore driven to the Bible as their only authority and message. They left their pulpits trembling with urgent concern for the souls of their hearers and fully aware of their accountability to God for preaching His Word, and His Word alone. Their sermons were measured by power; Fosdick's by popularity.

Authentic expository preaching takes the presentation of the Word of God as its central aim. The purpose of the preacher is to read the text, interpret the text, explain the text, and apply the text. Thus, the text drives the sermon from beginning to end. In fact, in too many of today's sermons, the text plays a subordinate role to other concerns.

Real exposition takes time, preparation, dedication, and discipline. The foundation of expository preaching is the confidence that the Holy Spirit will apply the Word to the hearts of the hearers—explained by the Reformers as the ministry of Word and Spirit. That ministry—so vital to the people of God—is missing or minimized in many evangelical congregations.

The current debate over preaching may well shake congregations, denominations, and the evangelical movement. But know this: The recovery and renewal of the church in this generation will come only when from pulpit to pulpit the herald preaches as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.

