

The Centrality of Preaching

by Tom Lyon

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Preaching has fallen on hard times. But this has happened before. Calvin wrote:

At the present day there are many who are well-nigh sickened by the very name of preaching, because there are so many stupid, ignorant men who blurt out their worthless brainwaves from the pulpit.

That was four hundred and fifty years ago! Today, not only has preaching been decentralized, but the greater part of what is called “preaching” no longer deserves to be at the center. This has created a vacuum, and few have raised a voice while a Pandora’s Box of replacements has rushed in to fill the void.

Rises and Falls in Preaching

A. W. Tozer saw the danger:

One of the most popular current errors, and the one out of which springs most of the noisy, blustering religious activity in evangelical circles, is the notion that as times change the church must change with them. That mentality which mistakes Hollywood for the Holy City is too gravely astray to be explained otherwise than as a judicial madness visited upon professing Christians for affronts committed against the Spirit of God.

And John MacArthur aptly described it:

Worship services in many churches today are like a merry-go-round. You drop a token in the collection box; it is a good ride. There’s music and lots of motion up and down. The ride is carefully timed and seldom varies in length. Lots of good feelings are generated, and it is the one ride you can be sure will never be the least bit threatening or challenging. But though you spend the whole time feeling as if you’re moving forward, you get off exactly where you got on.

The sixteenth-century Reformation, seventeenth-century Puritanism, and the eighteenth-century Great Awakening were all revivals of preaching! Whatever else they were, they brought preaching back to the center. Similarly, periods of decline were marked by a corresponding decline in preaching. The nineteenth-century languished under the influence of Finney’s “new measures.” Preaching was reduced to “moral suasion.” This is reflected in modern “crusade evangelism,” in which the sermon has become a mere prelude to the “invitation.” The twentieth-century dawned with the pulpit histrionics of Billy Sunday. Preaching had become

“pulpitism.” A more sophisticated retreat was found in the “quiet talks” of inspirational liberalism. “Sharing” rather than preaching marked the advent of a “kinder, gentler” Christianity. J. Gresham Machen spoke of

the miserable phrase, *sharing Christ*, which so sickens those of us who believe that the work of preaching is not that of sharing an experience but of proclaiming a message.

From these influences preaching has not recovered. Lloyd-Jones saw the connection:

Is it not clear that the decadent periods and eras in the history of the Church have always been those periods when preaching has declined? What is it that always heralds the dawn of Reformation or of a Revival? It is renewed preaching.

There is much discussion among the pundits of religion to account for the decline in preaching. “At one time we were told that poverty was the explanation...today we are being told that affluence is the great problem” (Lloyd-Jones).

This confusion is multiplied by the fact that the assault is joined on two fronts: both the modern pew and the pulpit have agreed to place everything but preaching at the center. Moreover, the center now being occupied, nothing short of a Copernican revolution would restore preaching to its rightful position. In the midst of this, apparently no one has had the temerity to ask the question: *What has God called for to be placed at the center?*

Two Primary Forces Now at Work

The first major force at work is *anti-intellectualism*. Nowadays, especially in religion, it is considered an insult to be called upon to think. Preaching declines with the decline of doctrine, and preaching has faded today for the simple reason that nowadays there is a lot less to preach. The modern pulpit has been dumbed-down because the gospel is no longer considered to be a theological discipline.

Many a preacher has been warned about preaching over the people’s heads. I ask, ‘What are people’s heads for? God Almighty gave them those heads and I think they ought to use them!’ As a preacher, I deny that any of the truths of God are over the heads of the people. I deny it! (A. W. Tozer)

The Puritans understood that a mindless Christianity will foster a spineless Christianity. An anti-intellectual gospel will spawn an irrelevant gospel that does not get beyond “felt needs.” That’s what is happening in our churches today. We’ve lost our Christian mind, and for the most part we do not see the necessity of recovering it. (Joel Beeke)

The second force at work is *individualism*. Whereas preaching declines with the eclipse of doctrine, it is equally frustrated with the decline of a robust view of the church. Preaching is an “event”—an event which occurs only in the midst of a church gathered for worship. “There is something in the very atmosphere of Christian people meeting together to worship God and to

listen to preaching” (Lloyd-Jones). That “something” is lost where the gathered church is jettisoned in favor of privately reading sermons (even the best) or listening to tapes. Today, sermons may be accessed electronically, but the ethos of preaching is lost. This arm-chair, atomistic view of private religion is the bane of preaching.

Among ourselves, are there not many that reject the ordinance of God? Is not, say they, reading of good books at home as good as going to church? Do not such confess that the rivers of Damascus are as good as Jordan? We must come to heaven by the foolishness of preaching. (Richard Sibbes)

“Despise not prophesyings” (1 Thess 5:20):

By the term prophesying I mean the science of the interpreting of Scripture. The statement is remarkable for its commendation of outward preaching. (Calvin)

True preaching, and the obedient hearing of revealed truth, are an acceptable form of worship to the Most High, and perhaps one of the most spiritual in which the human mind can be engaged. (Spurgeon)

Where this “science” and “obedient hearing” is de-centralized, the present vague and vapid state of religion is the melancholy result.

Substitutes for Preaching

Returning to the previous thought: What has popularly filled the void left by the dereliction of preaching? Perhaps the most obvious answer is found in *sacraments*, as in Rome’s substitution of the “mass” for the exposition of the Bible (and their “homilies” do not answer to any sensible definition of expository preaching). This is sadly reflected in the architecture of even Protestant churches where the pulpit is tellingly shifted to one side in favor of a centralized altar.

Then there is the entrance of *counseling* which has in no small part contributed to the demotion of preaching. A re-definition of the business of the Christian minister, who now transfers his energy from handling the word of God to handling people. One noted author in this field (Jay Adams) has defined preaching as nothing but group counseling, and observed no difference between counseling and preaching except that the latter is louder. But J. Gresham Machen warned seventy years ago the danger of “the minister ceasing to be a specialist, and becoming merely a sort of general manager of the affairs of a congregation.” Spurgeon opined, a hundred years before the modern counseling craze, this trend “criminally sacrifices the study to the parlour.” Lloyd-Jones similarly observed: “As preaching goes down personal counseling goes up.” The Scriptures are not “God’s advice for successful living”!

There is in addition this contemporary notion that preaching is not an end in itself, but rather a device to equip Christians for “*every-member ministry*.” The preacher is re-cast as the coach and

cheerleader of the congregation, the one who sends them onto the field to “win one for the Gipper.” A century ago Warfield warned:

If the minister comes to be thought of, for example, fundamentally as merely the head of a social organization from whom may be demanded pleasant manners and executive ability; or as little more than a zealous ‘promoter,’ if the minister’s whole function is summed up in these or such things, if the whole function of the minister is ‘inspirational’ rather than ‘instructional,’ then, no doubt, we may dispense with all serious study of the Scripture.

Beyond this there is a thesaurus of departures from preaching itself. A blizzard of unregulated proxies intrude. A parade of concerts, dramatic skits, celebrity “testimonies,” and the occasional “miracle” await the congregation. If there is any time left, perhaps a moment for “popular preaching.” The operative word here is “popular.” It is anecdotal, performance oriented, even exhibitionistic. Preaching is become a jejune personality cult. Symptomatic of this is the charismatic “preacher” who announced as he walked to the pulpit: “I can’t wait to hear what I am going to say.” Rather than faithful exposition there is spontaneity and novelty, aiming at the perceived needs of the congregation rather than the real needs determined by Scripture. This quest for modernity and relevance, this “penchant to articulate the Christian faith in the idiom of everyday affairs...this vernacularizing of the Christian message” (D.G. Hart), supposes modern man to be wiser than God, and people to be more important than truth. A constellation of modern phobias are dictated to the pulpit. This “Tell us where you hurt and what you hope for, and we will show you how Christ can satisfy your needs,” opts to listen to the voice of our “inner child” rather than to the voice of the living God!

Restoring Confidence in Preaching

What confidence in preaching is required for it to be placed at the center?

1. *Confidence that preaching is the only conveyance which enjoys God’s blessing*, in short, the conviction that preaching is an ‘ordinance’ of God, a sacrament in the truest sense. Preaching can claim the centre because God has placed it that, and has left no room for it to be contested. 1 Corinthians 1:21 tells us that ‘it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe’. True, it is not preaching *per se*, but ‘the thing preached’. But it is that thing *preached*: ‘the preaching of the thing’. The content cannot be disassociated from the vehicle. The Word of God is ‘manifested in preaching’ (Titus 1:3). Surgeon always wrote his notes in purple ink, considering it to be the color of royalty. He viewed his pulpit-work as a ambassadorial charge from the King Himself.

2. *Confidence that preaching is the Word of God*. The second Helvetic Confession (1566) says, *Praedicatio Verbi Dei Verbum Dei Est* - ‘The preaching of the Word is the Word of God.’

It is put to us whether our people should not be taught to come to church for the purpose of speaking to God rather than in order to be spoken to by a man. This has a pious sound, but there is a fallacy in it. Preaching is not merely the speaking of a man. If it is, then it is

certainly not worth coming to church for. Preaching, if it is of the right kind, is the voice of God. (James Stalker)

3. *Confidence that God's capacity to bless preaching is greater than my ability to preach.* James Henley Thornwell, reputedly one of the greatest preachers produced in nineteenth-century America, lamented: "My own performances fill me with disgust. I have never made, much less preached, a sermon in my life, and I am beginning to despair of ever being able to do it." Lloyd-Jones confided: "I can say quite honestly that I would not cross the road to listen to myself preaching." And James Stalker said, "I always seem to myself to be only beginning to learn my trade; and the furthest I ever get in the way of confidence is to believe that I shall preach well next time."

A preaching ministry is absolutely essential to the health and prosperity of a visible church. The pulpit is the place where the chief victories of the Gospel have always been won, and no Church has ever done much for the advancement of true religion in which the pulpit has been neglected. Would we know whether a minister is a truly apostolic man? If he is, he will give the best of his attention to his sermons. The minister who exalts the sacraments, or forms of the Church, above preaching, may be a zealous, earnest, conscientious, and respectable minister; but his zeal is not according to knowledge. (J. C. Ryle)

The church today is beset with problems. It is continually stumbling upon new measures. Problem is, these measures exacerbate rather than solve its problems. It dreams of answering felt-needs, building self-esteem, and motivating "purpose-driven" or "promise-keeping" lives. But amidst all these fads and inventions, the one thing, the only thing which will serve to overcome its distress is a return to God-honored and God-honoring preaching.