

EXPOSITORY PREACHING AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

I do not believe it is over the top to say that there is a crisis in preaching not only in the Evangelical world but also in large swaths of the Southern Baptist world. In the SBC, we talk about expository preaching; often we do not practice it.

I received a phone call from a man in Texas. He asked me if I had a student who either was close to graduating or maybe graduated recently whom I could recommend to him who would consider planting a new church. His one condition was that the new pastor must be an expositional preacher. Though I suspected what his answer would be, I queried him further about his request. He had been to every Southern Baptist church within a three-county contiguous area, and had visited many churches more than once, looking for a church where the pastor preached expository sermons. He further stated that he had been to lots of evangelical churches, not just Baptist churches, and could not find a single one where the pastor preached expositionally. He went on to describe a litany of ridiculous “sermons” he had heard of the “five ways to be happy” and “three ways to love your mother” variety. He concluded: “My wife and I are 63 years old and recently retired. We are prepared financially to stand behind a new work if we can have a pastor who would preach expositionally.”

This situation is not atypical. I routinely hear it in varied permutations.

In many churches, pop culture, personal experience, packaged pragmatism, and pop psychology have displaced the Bible. Add to this the urge today to be “creative” in preaching. Now I am not opposed to creativity, and I hope you are not either. However, creativity is something of a code word today in some church circles for “anti-expository preaching,” or at the very least “creativity” is appealed to justify why some do not practice exposition regularly. I am all for creativity, but when creativity subverts or overrides the communication of biblical content, we have a real problem. *Preaching* magazine is one of the professional journals for preachers. In the January/February 2005 edition, there is a lead

article entitled “Preaching Creatively: An Interview with Ed Young Jr.” pastor of Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas. Young tells us we must be creative in preaching because God desires it. I do not want to be overly critical, but I am not at all sure God “desires” that we be creative. That seems to be *extra* biblical to me. That said, however, I do think we should be creative in our preaching. The interviewer asked Young this question: “Some critics might believe that with all the emphasis on creativity it would be possible to give less priority to the Bible and preaching. Tell me about your use of Scripture in your messages.” Young’s response was telling. He said that topical, expositional or character study preaching all comes from the Bible. “Everything we do comes from a Biblical worldview and according to the Bible, like a series I just did called ‘RPM’s, - Recognizing Potential Mates.’ Those are biblical, Scriptural principles. So even if it’s a topical series I’m always in the Bible.” Later he says: “We’re a biblically-driven church.”¹ Young mentions his expositional series through James that he preached several years ago. As far as I can tell from Young’s preaching over the past ten years, this is the only expositional series he has done. Notice how Young deflects the question and basically says all his preaching comes from the Bible. By this explanation, Joel Osteen pastors a biblically driven church.

PREACHING AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

If the mission of the Church is the evangelism of the lost and the equipping of the saved, then of all things the Church does, ought not preaching to be at its apex? Of all the things that are done in a church service, ought not preaching to be central? It is interesting to compare the account of the giving of the Great Commission in Matthew and Mark. Whereas Matthew 28:19 speaks of going into all the world and “making disciples,” Mark 16:15 says “Go into all the world and preach the gospel. . . .” Obviously preaching plays a paramount role in the Church’s mandate to fulfill the Great Commission. In recent years, a few lonely voices have been crying in the wilderness for a return to preaching as biblical exposition. But they are often drowned out by the din of voices that come from many places.

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, I will suggest and comment briefly on three reasons why preaching is critical to the mission of the Church. Second, I will mention, if only in a cursory fashion, four movements that are impacting preaching. All of these movements, in one way or another, are problematic for preaching and have, in my opinion, hindered preaching in the overall mission of the Church.

THREE REASONS WHY PREACHING IS FOUNDATIONAL FOR THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

First is the theological reason: the nature of Scripture and the nature of the Church. God is its ultimate author of Scripture according to 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, correction, for training in

¹ “Preaching Creatively: Interview with Ed Young Jr.”, *Preaching* (Jan.- Feb. 2005), vol. 20, no. 4, at http://www.preaching.com/resources/past_issues/archive5/, accessed October 3, 2009.

righteousness.” When New Testament authors quote the Old Testament, we find that God and Scripture are used as interchangeable subjects. God is viewed as the author when he is not the speaker, as in Matthew 19: 4-5. Sometimes the phrase “Scripture says” is used when God is the direct speaker. Twice in Galatians and once in Romans Scripture is called God’s speech. What Scripture says is the word of God. The first theological foundation for preaching is that God has spoken. J. I. Packer said Scripture is God preaching.

The nature of the church requires that preaching be paramount in the fulfillment of her mission. The Great Commission as recorded in Mark 16:15 indicates how Jesus viewed preaching as the necessary means for the church to fulfill the Great Commission. The church was birthed in preaching according to Acts 2. Paul says in Romans 10 that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.” Evangelistic preaching grows the church. Biblical preaching edifies the church. The book of Acts clearly shows this. Luke records summary statements of the results of the preaching of the Word in strategic places in Acts. Acts tells us the secret of church growth was preaching and prayer. Look at the New Testament vocabulary for preaching in Acts. For example, in Acts 17:2, Paul “opened” the Scripture and “explained” the meaning to the people. The Pauline epistles are essentially sermons to believers in local churches. The book of Hebrews is a written sermon. Notice how it takes Old Testament Scripture, explains, illustrates and applies its meaning to the New Testament church. The New Testament itself testifies to the foundational nature of preaching for the mission and purpose of the church. In his swan song, Paul tells young Timothy to “preach the Word” (2 Timothy 4:2). You cannot have a church without preaching, and you cannot have church growth without preaching. Preaching is fundamental to New Testament ecclesiology. Preaching must be foundational in the mission of the church for theological reasons.

Second, the necessity of preaching for the mission of the church is illustrated in the history of the Church. Each of the confessions of faith that came out of the Reformation speak early on about the primacy of preaching for achieving the mission of the church. The church cannot be the church unless she is the preaching church. The Reformation engendered a revival of preaching, Biblical preaching, and of expository preaching. Luther was teaching Romans when Erasmus’ Greek New Testament was published. Some say one can actually see when Luther began to make use of the Greek New Testament in his study, preaching and teaching. It revolutionized his preaching and teaching. The first of Luther’s Ninety-five theses was on the subject of repentance taken right out of Erasmus’ Greek New Testament. Preaching was paramount for Ulrich Zwingli as well. Zwingli came to the pastorate of the Grossmuenster church in Zurich and on his first Sunday, which was also his birthday, January 1, 1519, he opened the Bible to Matthew 1:1 and began to preach expositionally through the Gospel of Matthew. From 1519 until his death in 1531 he preached through most of the Bible. Our Anabaptist forefathers were heavily influenced by Zwingli in their preaching.

Calvin’s exegesis and expositions of Scripture are well known. Calvin left Geneva after a big fuss with the council and went to Strasburg for three years. When he was finally persuaded by Farel to return to Zurich three years later, he walked into a packed church. The people expected him to rail on the city council that had given him so much grief three years earlier. Instead, Calvin instructed the people to open their Bibles to the verse he left off preaching from three years earlier and continued his preaching through that book of the

Bible. The post-Reformation preaching of the Puritans was essentially expositional in nature. The best preaching in England, America, and beyond from the eighteenth century to the present has been expositional preaching. The Reformers, by their own preaching and writing, show they considered preaching to be critical to the establishment and ongoing growth and health of the church.

The third reason why preaching is necessary for the mission of the church is the pastoral reason. Preaching was viewed as the primary method of pastoral care in the history of the church. The classical definitions of pastoral care throughout church history speak of preaching as the primary method of doing pastoral care. For example, Luther said:

If any man would preach let him suppress his own words. Let him make them count in family matters and secular affairs but here in the church he should speak nothing except the Word of the rich Head of the household otherwise it is not the true church. Therefore this must be the rule God is speaking that is why a preacher by virtue of this commission and office is administering the household of God and dare say nothing but what God says and commands. And although much talking is done which is outside the Word of God, yet the church is not established by such talk though men were to turn mad in their insistence upon it.²

Preaching within the church both equips and challenges the church to fulfill the Great Commission.

At this point we turn our attention to consider four movements, each of which has, in the opinion of this author, hindered the role of preaching in the Church.

PREACHING AND THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

First is the Charismatic movement. My specific concern here is the notion that God speaks today apart from the Bible with new revelation. According to some Charismatics, God guides people today by giving them words of direction through all of the same media as the Bible says God used in the past: visions, prophets, angels, and so forth. Here is the problem for preaching: it diverts attention from Scripture and ultimately Jesus as God's final revelation.

It is interesting to study the use the author of Hebrews makes of Old Testament quotations. The author quotes the Old Testament directly thirty-one times. The author's choice of quotation formulae is instructive of his high view of Scripture. He employs some form of the verb "to speak" or "to say" and never "it is written." Furthermore, note that in the catena of seven quotations in Heb 1:5–13, God is the subject and some form of the verb "to say" is used to introduce the quotations. Notice further in Heb 3:7–11, the author quotes a portion of Psalm 95, but here the quotation is introduced by "the Holy Spirit says." In Heb 2:12–13, Jesus is the subject of the verb "say" which introduces two Old Testament quotations from the Psalms and Isaiah. In this latter case, the two Old Testament quotations are said to be spoken by Jesus, even though in their original Old Testament context, that was

² *Luther's Works*, vol. XII, 1413.

not the case. These examples illustrate the fact that the author views all of Scripture as the very voice of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The author is here stressing two things: 1) the ongoing relevance of Scripture to speak to the current situation, and 2) Scripture for the author of Hebrews is God's direct speech. Scripture is an authoritative word from God in the present time. The author of Hebrews focuses on what God is saying now to us through the word of God written in the past. Not once does the author say: "God has given me a word of knowledge to give to you," as is common in some Charismatic circles today. The author may himself have been an apostle; certainly he was a leader in the apostolic church. Yet he addresses his people through Scripture, not extra-biblical revelation! Where does God speak today? There is a Charismatic answer to that question and a correct answer to it. When people are looking for a new word from God apart from Scripture, there is an inevitable loss of Scriptural authority and Scriptural sufficiency, and preaching is negatively affected. The result is that the church suffers.

PREACHING AND THE NEW HOMILETIC

The second movement is the New Homiletic, formally birthed in 1971 with the publication of Fred Craddock's *As One without Authority*. In that book Craddock argued for a revolution in preaching. For him, old style "discursive" (read "expository") preaching that has three points and a poem was no longer reaching anybody. That kind of expository preaching is passé. Preachers need to move in a new direction. Craddock's new direction is narrative. We need to think in terms of story. The goal of preaching according to the New Homiletic is to evoke an experience in the listeners. Building on Kierkegaard's notion of indirect communication, Craddock argued that the frontal approach to preaching no longer worked. What we need to do is to come at people from the side door or the back door via indirect communication. Craddock's reasoning for this was his belief that people in the United States had become saturated with Biblical knowledge. Thus, to preach the Bible in a direct, expositional way, would merely bore people. I have no doubt that was not true in 1971 to the extent Craddock thought, but I also have absolutely no doubt it is not true today. The biblical illiteracy of our country generally, and people in churches particularly, is appalling. Now, almost forty years later, the New Homiletic has not been able to deliver what it promised and many of its former supporters have begun to doubt.³

³ See Thomas Long, "What Happened to Narrative Preaching?" *Journal for Preachers* 28.4 (Pentecost 2005): 9-14. Long admits that today many are beginning to have second thoughts about the effectiveness of the narrative approach to preaching. After noting the critique of narrative preaching "from the right, the middle, and the left," Long points out that the critics on the left have been the most severe, alleging that the new homiletics practitioners have been "not merely rhetorically mistaken, theologically misguided, or trendy, but they have committed far more serious offenses: potential oppression and abuse of power" (12). In the end, however, Long is not willing to give up narrative preaching and claims that it "grows out of a deep sense of the character, shape, and epistemology of the gospel" (13), though he offers little support for this claim.

Contrary to Eugene Lowry⁴ and the New Homiletic,⁵ you do not meet God dancing on the edge of mystery with sermons constructed in a narrative style in an attempt at indirect communication. We encounter God not apart from His Word but *through* His Word. Lowry appeals to the post-resurrection account in Luke 24 where Jesus is walking with the disciples to Emmaus. He makes the point that as soon as the two disciples recognized Jesus, He vanished. Lowry uses this scene to argue, through a twisted hermeneutic, that we never can quite get at the truth; when we get close, it vanishes. Lowry fails to note that before Jesus vanished, Scripture says He taught them the things concerning Himself. He opened the Scripture, opened their minds, and showed them everything in the Old Testament about Himself. Jesus' words in Luke 24 actually serve to promote the expositional preaching of Scripture.

PREACHING AND THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

The third movement is the Church Growth movement. Ironically, according to McGavern, it began in the same year as the New Homiletic. The influence of this movement on America's evangelical and charismatic churches has been phenomenal. Myriads of books have been written on the subject of how to grow a church. Many of these books and the principles behind them are less theological and highly pragmatic in nature. In my opinion, the Church Growth movement has been a mixed bag. One of the downsides to it has been the general lack of focus on preaching. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the Church Growth movement has actually hindered expository preaching in the United States because it has, inadvertently, de-emphasized the importance of preaching in the local church. One of the most surprising things about the books produced by this movement is the lack of emphasis placed on the role of preaching in church growth. Many do not even mention preaching. David Eby wrote a book in 1996 entitled *Power Preaching for Church Growth: The Role of Preaching in Growing Churches*.⁶ As far as I know, this was the first book to treat the subject in book-length format and Eby is not even in the Church Growth movement. His two chapters critiquing the Church Growth movement are must reads.

Eby read every book in the church growth movement and charted where they talk about preaching. In the early years of the movement, only one of the first sixteen books even listed Biblical preaching as an aspect of church growth. Eby then ransacked the next forty-eight books that came out on church growth. In ten thousand pages of material, less than fifty even mentioned preaching as important in church growth. He then examined all of the DMin dissertations at Fuller Library and found that of the three hundred and seventy seven dissertations completed since 1971 (through 1996), *only one was written on preaching and church growth*. The Church Growth movement has emphasized marketing and de-emphasized

⁴ Eugene Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 47.

⁵ See David Allen, *A Tale of Two Roads: Homiletics and Biblical Authority*, *JETS* 43 (2000), 489–515.

⁶ David Eby, *Power Preaching for Church Growth: The Role of Preaching in Growing Churches* (Great Britain: Mentor, 1996).

preaching. Evangelicals are outdoing everyone else as the supreme compromisers in church work today. What difference is there today between a popular market driven philosophy of church growth and classical liberalism? Both have resulted in a compromised culture. Classical liberalism capitulated to culture and much of evangelicalism today in my judgment is compromising with culture. An undefined theology combined with a seeker sensitive philosophy undermines the ability of the church to speak prophetically to culture. The moment a church compromises with culture in ways contrary to Scripture, at that moment she forfeits her prophetic position in the culture. On the other hand, the moment a church defies the spirit of the age she forfeits her marketing appeal. The preaching of the Gospel will always defy the spirit of the age.

PREACHING AND THE EMERGING CHURCH MOVEMENT

The fourth movement is the Emergent Church (EC) movement.⁷ Most of the congregations within this movement have a very amorphous ecclesiology. They have several websites, chat rooms, their own network, their own conferences, and their own speakers. The controlling term in the writings of EC authors is postmodernism, with its concomitant epistemological perspective that people learn less by rationality and more by feeling and experience. In the November/December 2004 edition of *Preaching*, the lead article is entitled “Preaching in the Emerging Church: An Interview with Dan Kimball.” Kimball states that in the EC “there’s great diversity in what they look like, how they think, how they express their faith, and what they believe theologically.”⁸ The emerging church does not want to get hung up on theology. Theology is not unimportant, but there is a resistance to drawing lines theologically in this movement. I suspect there is some correlation between this diverse theological outlook and the diversity one finds in EC preaching.

Kimball’s comments on preaching are a mixed bag. For example, when asked are there some things you are learning about preaching and communication as you go through this process, Kimball responded: “I would say almost everything I was taught in Seminary I do not use.”⁹ This negative attitude toward how preaching was taught in seminaries is reflected among many in the EC movement. I have observed in the literature produced by EC authors a general denigration of preaching in an expositional fashion. However, even

⁷ For a balanced treatment of what the Emerging Church movement is all about from one of its key leaders, consult Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). For a valuable critique of the movement, see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), and Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent by Two Guys Who Should Be* (Chicago: Moody, 2008).

⁸ “Preaching in the Emerging Church: An Interview with Dan Kimball,” *Preaching* (Nov. – Dec., 2004), vol. 20, no. 3, at http://www.preaching.com/resources/past_issues/11556856/archive5/, accessed on October 1, 2009.

⁹ Ibid.

here, the EC is not monolithic. Attitudes and practice range from the extreme of Doug Pagitt who champions a “dialogical” approach to preaching¹⁰ to a more text-based approach.

CONCLUSION

We have won the battle in the Southern Baptist Convention over the inerrancy of Scripture. We are in my judgment right now engaged in a battle that is almost as significant. It is the battle over the sufficiency of Scripture in preaching. Is the Bible, and the Bible alone, sufficient to change hearts, and to grow a church? Many are practicing a preaching style that in the final analysis fails to give the people in their churches the word of God. Many have compromised with the culture and have moved away from preaching in an expositional fashion. A few years ago an evangelical Romanian pastor had to leave his church because it was discovered that after the fall of Chuchesku and the demise of Communism in Romania he had been one of those pastors who was a collaborator with the Communists. They asked him why did he do it? He said, “I hate communism; it is a great evil. I did it because I thought it was the best way my church could function in the culture. And I thought that I would be able to help my people and protect my people if I just fudged and collaborated with the Communists.” As a result, that pastor lost his church. The mission of the Church does not permit us to collaborate with the culture. The Gospel has always been counter-cultural.

The mission of the Church cannot be fulfilled without preaching. Preaching that does not communicate the Gospel clearly and that does not explain the meaning of the text of Scripture to Christians so as to equip them to fulfill the Church’s mission will result in a spiritually dwarfed Church and a truncated witness to the world.

¹⁰ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.