

Correcting the Absence of God-Centered Preaching

A pastor in Kentucky had only one sermon. Even though recall time was coming, he could not come up with a new message. But when the vote was taken, he got a unanimous recall.

The following year, he tried to improve but couldn't. He still had only one sermon.

"We better pack our belongings," he said to his wife. "They aren't going to keep us another year."

Lo and behold, he got another unanimous recall.

With the third year coming to an end—with the same old sermon—this time he knew for sure he was finished. Would you believe it? Another unanimous recall.

He finally got the courage to ask one of the older deacons, "Why do you keep me here? You know I can't preach."

The reply from the old deacon: "It's very simple, pastor: We never wanted a preacher in the first place."

One of the reasons preaching has become less and less popular is not due merely to lack of talent in the pulpit, but also to increasing moves toward softening the **gospel**. A softened or diluted **gospel** appeals to this what's-in-it-for-me generation.

In our folly, we believe such acquiescence will increase attendance numbers, but in more than 50 years of ministry I've found the opposite to be true. It's not preaching "ability" that's lacking; our greatest problem is the absence of **God-centered preaching**.

I once read about a British poll that was conducted to get to the bottom of why **church attendance** had decreased so

significantly in Western Europe. The answer? No preaching on hell or the necessity of the **blood of Jesus** propitiating the justice of God.

It's interesting to me that history made more than 300 years ago illustrates the same finding. As the **Great Awakening** was coming to its peak in the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards wrote that the whole town of Northampton, Mass., was full of "talk about God." From 1733 to 1738, he preached almost entirely on "justification by faith"—that we are saved not by our works but by faith alone, as the Reformers of the 16th century rediscovered. And in 1741, his famous sermon—on Deuteronomy 32:35, "their feet will slide in due time"—resulted in strong men holding on to pews (and to tree trunks outside the church) to keep them from sliding into hell. Through the **Holy Spirit**, Edwards' faithfulness and conviction to preach scriptural truth ushered in a high watermark for preaching in America's history, ultimately giving the country her soul.

A Silent Divorce

God-centered preaching happens when the Word and the Spirit equally and simultaneously come together. As I wrote in this magazine a few years ago, unfortunately a "silent divorce" between the Word and the Spirit has emerged in the church, limiting the amount of God-centered preaching today.

The results of this divorce are similar to a marital one, with some children staying with the mother, some with the father. In the divorce between the Word and the Spirit, those on the Word side claim, "The honor of God's name will not be restored until we earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints, get back to expository preaching, and return to the theology of the Reformation, and the God of Edwards and Charles Spurgeon." I find nothing wrong with that emphasis.

Those on the Spirit side plead for a return to the book of Acts: "Until we see the gifts of the Spirit in operation—**supernatural signs**, wonders and **miracles**, prayer

meeting rooms shaken, healings as when Peter's mere shadow was sufficient, when lying to the **Holy Spirit** resulted in instant death—the honor of God will not be restored.” Nothing is wrong with that emphasis either.

But neither side seems to get it and learn from each other. We have become preoccupied with reaching people and seeing churches grow. In the meantime, heresies abound—whether upholding open theism or universalism, both of which soften and hobble the **gospel** and rob people of true spiritual energy and personal growth. Parallel with this is the **prosperity gospel** that keeps ministries financially afloat but spiritually drowning.

Word and Spirit

In my experience, I've heard and given thousands of sermons and have found that there are basically two ways of delivering a message: (1) bringing the people to the text; or (2) bringing the text to the people.

Bringing the people to the text means beginning with the needs we know exist—and trying to make people feel as though they've been ministered to. Sometimes people are edified by this approach, sometimes not.

Bringing the text to the people is to begin with the meaning of the text and unfold it—whether or not you know what the people's needs are. The irony is that bringing the text to the people always touches them where they truly are, causing them to ask, “How did you know I would be here today?”

And yet unfolding the text's meaning is not enough. People must not only hear the Word, but also hear from God and feel His presence. It's one thing to be exegetically correct, to have a balanced sermon full of doctrine and good illustrations. It's another for people to be confronted with the immediate and direct **presence of God**.

The Word of God intersecting with the **Holy Spirit**—this is what

will cause people to “run to hear preaching,” as they did in the case of certain Puritans in England. It also (without trying) incorporates Aristotle’s three elements that make a good speech: ethos (the credibility of the speaker), pathos (speech’s appeal to the senses) and logos (the reason, content or logic of the message). Some sermons are strong on pathos but devoid of anything worthwhile to say, while others bend more to logos (to quote my Westminster Chapel predecessor Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “perfectly orthodox, perfectly useless”).

I believe the **Holy Spirit** wants to be Himself in our preaching—just Himself. When the Spirit in the form of a dove descended on Jesus in the Jordan, the Spirit “remained” (John 1:32-33) because He was at home with Jesus. When resting on Jesus, He could utterly be Himself.

I don’t know about you, but I want the **Holy Spirit** to be Himself when descending on me and past me—directly and immediately reaching the people to whom I’m preaching. I have a theory: We preachers block and hinder the Spirit from reaching people. But when He gets through, that is, past us (despite us)—people are thrilled, electrified, motivated and edified. They want to “talk about God.”

Holy Spirit Roadblocks

How do we hinder the **Holy Spirit** in our preaching?

Word choices. The Apostle Paul aimed to preach the **gospel** “not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Cor. 1:17, ESV). Paul possessed a great intellect and could outdo almost anyone with sublime rhetoric. But he made an effort not to revert to this approach, fearing it would compete with the message he wanted to preach. In other words, Paul was careful to speak in a manner causing people to focus on the message. Indeed, he made a calculated decision to know nothing among his hearers but the person of Jesus Christ and He crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

When we pervert the meaning of the text. I'm assuming that you use a text when you preach. (Sadly, some preachers don't even bother reading the Bible at all!) Assuming our preaching is Word-based, our call is to get to its meaning—what it meant when it was written and what that means for people today.

We should be like clear window panes, never calling attention to ourselves but rather letting people see through us. Too often, however, I have behaved like a stained-glass window—keeping people from seeing out, calling attention to my cleverness, my “colors.” God, please forgive me. Still others of us are like opaque windows, keeping people from seeing in (for example, when we are too defensive to be vulnerable).

When we're not ourselves. The great 19th-century preacher Phillips Brookes called it the folly of imitation. When we are not ourselves but instead imitate our mentors or preachers we admire, we will never reproduce another's genius—only that person's faults! Moreover, when we're afraid to be vulnerable in our preaching, we dishonor the **Holy Spirit**. The greatest freedom is having nothing to prove. When we are defensive and fail to be transparent, we rob the Spirit of letting our hearers see into us—which they deserve.

When we let personal concerns or emotional involvements get in the way of our preaching. This is also called preaching “at” people.

When we don't let Him master us in our delivery. Sometimes this means departing from our notes or changing our sermon at the last minute—when the inner testimony of the Spirit directs us differently than what we had planned.

I was named after my father's favorite preacher, Dr. R.T. Williams, who advised those he ordained: “Honor the blood and honor the Holy Ghost.” The blood refers to the cross of Jesus, being unashamed of what it does for us and God. Honoring the Holy Ghost means to let Him take charge (as best we know how)

once we begin to preach. This way God gets all the glory, even if we didn't get to deliver that brilliant word we had so ardently prepared.

When it comes to preaching, I have made every mistake (I think) that can be made. I know what it is to preach in fear. But if we continue to focus on our mandate of preaching truth and Spirit without fear of having to appease or appeal to others, God-centered preaching always will be the result.

When we aim for the sole glory of God, make a calculated decision to equally honor the Word and the Spirit, and aspire to leave people with the immediate sense of His presence, a transaction takes place: God comes down and lives are changed.

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