

How Preaching Moved From Solid Theology to Pop Psychology

There has been a growing trend among evangelical pastors and churches over the past 50 years regarding the demise of theology and its subsequent replacement with psychology. (By theology I mean the serious systematic and orderly study of God.) There are numerous reasons for this, not the least of which is the failure of many seminaries to fully prepare potential pastors for the practical rigors and challenges of leading a local church, and that so many leaders find themselves burned out and unable to cope with all the pressures of the ministry and their personal lives.

The genesis of this trend started in the late 1800s, when theology no longer functioned as the “queen of the sciences” (in which all academic study revolved around the study of God), but became a separate field of study through seminaries only for those who were going into full-time ministry.

The repercussions of this have been cataclysmic. Now it has become popular that theology is not important enough for the average Christian, and also that it is not practical for the real world.

The domino effect of this has been felt more and more until its culmination in the early 20th century, when most universities eradicated all references to theology as its centerpiece. Note that this shift began at Princeton University in the late 1920s.

Prior to this shift, natural empirical science was actually called moral philosophy, as the study of nature was seen as a complement and an extension of theology. Creation and nature were called the 67th book of the Bible that was needful to

study, to understand and know the glory of God. Read Psalm 19:1-6 and Romans 1:18-21.

Universities (the genesis of which grew out of King Charlemagne calling on the church to educate the masses of people in his empire during the ninth century) started as a Christian endeavor. Even in the United States, most of the Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth and Columbia, started out as Christian universities with an emphasis on studies in divinity. Then, it was thought only theology could unify and cohere all of the various studies together. Thus the name uni (one) versity.

Today, all of the various academic departments in most universities are disconnected in regards to their fields of study, with no one overarching discipline or worldview. It would be more accurate to call these places of learning "multiversities" instead of universities. Thus the word university implies a Christian worldview for academic study.

Because of this cultural shift away from theology, the people who attend Christian churches today have been trained to think that theology is not necessary or even practical. This is in spite of people being destroyed by a lack of the knowledge of God (Hos. 4:6).

Worse yet, this has led pastors to preach messages that show they spend more time studying behaviorism and sociology than they do the Scriptures. Many of the fastest growing churches today have pulpit preaching based on self-help positive messages with or without Scripture as an appendage. The days of a pastor preaching relevant doctrinal messages have now gone the way of the dinosaur!

Furthermore, most successful Christian leaders espouse a corporate style of leadership with most of their personal focus on pragmatics and organizational strategy than a serious study of the Scriptures. I think a leader is called to do

both, not either/or. But leaders should delegate as much administration as possible so they can spend more time alone with God.

Many churches painstakingly take their congregants through a long process to make sure everyone understands the mission and vision of the church, but do not make the same effort to ensure attendees know the fundamentals of the faith! I wonder what Peter and the Apostles would have thought about God's shepherds moving away from devoting themselves to the study of Scripture and prayer to what amounts to "waiting on tables" (Acts 6:1-4)?

Psalm 1, Joshua 1:8, 2 Timothy 2:16 and all of Psalm 119 speak of the importance for all believers (not just pastors) to know the Scriptures in order to be equipped to serve God as His followers. Deuteronomy 17:18 teaches that even kings should write out the whole Book of the Law by hand so they would be successful as civil magistrates.

If all believers are commanded to know the Scriptures and grow in the knowledge of God (2 Pet. 3:18), how much more should we who are called to preach as God's representatives to His people! While church elders who preach are considered worthy of double honor according to 1 Timothy 5:17, James 3:1-3 also gives a warning not to be quick to teach because we will be judged even more strictly! We as teachers must know what we are talking about, and study to show ourselves approved unto God, rightly dividing the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

In spite of all this, rare is the pastor who considers himself or herself a theologian (one devoted and skilled in the study of God) although frequent is the leader who presently owns a doctorate. Even the highly acclaimed doctor of ministry degree in most seminaries is considered more of a study of pragmatic ministry models than the Scriptures. Thus pastors now have an academic counterpart to the professional education revered by those in the fields of law, business and medicine, which

unfortunately has the potential to perpetuate the corporate model more than the biblical model espoused by Peter and the Apostles. (I say this even though one of my doctorates is in ministry, but I made sure my concentration was in biblical worldview so that my focus stayed on theology.)

Not only is there a de-emphasis on theology in Christian circles, but in most Christian leadership circles it is mentioned with scorn and as something irrelevant! I even hear pastors brag that they do not talk about doctrine or that people do not have to study theology to be effective believers. This may be true in regards to a new Christian as a soul winner, but not true in the long run regarding their effectiveness.

As a result, many evangelical churches and sermons are a mile long and an inch deep! We emphasize getting people into our church buildings via slick marketing strategies, felt-need programs and nice ambiance, while neglecting the greater commandment of sending out saints to transform the world as disciples of Christ!

This shift away from theology towards pragmatism is also going to cause many pastors to shy away from preaching much of the content in the epistles of Paul (because he is too sexist and homophobic, for example). This will result in the church becoming progressively doctrinally liberal, just as the declining historic mainline Protestant denominations have become.

In my observations of the church over the past 30 years, I have seen biblical literacy gradually being replaced by a touchy-feely subjective approach to God that can eventuate in replacing the logos (reason; truth) of God with an irrationalism that is closer to new age spirituality than it is to historic Christian orthodoxy.

Much of the culture has been captivated with a postmodern

notion that truth cannot be known; we can only feel our way through life! When I was new to the ministry, one church leader even told me not to study the Bible because doctrine is not important, but instead to read the Scriptures in the narrative as a love letter from God to me. I retort that if doctrine is not important, then we might as well do away with the first chapter of John, all of Romans and Hebrews, along with most of the content of the epistles of Paul, Peter, James and Jude.

There are also those among evangelicals who claim that the theological construct since the Reformation is embedded in a modernist/Enlightenment view of truth that has also been tainted by a Greek concept of rationalism. These say that the Scriptures must be interpreted through the lens of Jerusalem, which is holistic, rather than through the lens of Athens, which is more didactic, systematic and rational.

While there is a lot of truth in this, we also need to understand that God has providentially directed His church through the centuries and allowed Greek/rational influence in the church.

Also, God is very systematic and detailed at times in dealing with His people. Read Exodus 25 with the building of the Tabernacle of Moses, and the book of Leviticus and the dietary laws, ceremonial laws, and the nuanced details regarding the five different sacrifices the Levitical priests had to administer.

Regarding the New Testament, you could not get any more Greek than the name given for Jesus in John 1:1. Logos was used in Greek culture for hundreds of years to depict logic, reason, concept, a message, doctrine, teaching and in respect to the mind it was used to describe the mental faculty of thinking, reasoning, calculating and in giving an account for something. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus first used the term logos around 500 B.C. to designate the divine reason or plan which

coordinates a changing universe.

Paul the apostle used the Greek form of reasoning in Acts 17 when he debated with Greek philosophers before the Areopagus, and his treatise on salvation in the book of Romans is as close to systematic theology as anything else I have read.

While it is true we must understand Hebraic thought in order to correctly interpret the Scriptures, we also need to understand that the Hebrew writers also include much in the way of systematic thinking and doctrine which can be aptly understood and studied by the use of both biblical and systematic theological works.

I am not saying that pastors ought to neglect the practical administrative matters of their local church, but that they need to go back to focusing on the study of and growth in the knowledge of God as the locus of their calling with which everything else is built around! I do not want to go to heaven and have God sarcastically congratulating me for being a great deacon of the church instead of functioning in my call as a prophetic minister to the church (Ephesians 4:11).

We need to be like King Josiah, who rediscovered the Book of the Law, if we are truly going to experience biblical reformation. Our biblical illiteracy has already reached a point to which many of our brothers and sisters do not know the difference between a true move of God and an emotional tizzy, or biblical reformation from a political victory by a Democrat or a Republican.

My biblical model regarding all this is the late great Jonathan Edwards, who led the first Great Awakening in America in the 1740s. He was not only a revivalist and reformer, but a pastor, a great prayer leader who led continental "Concerts of Prayer," a theologian and a writer who even penned scientific works (one of his famous writings was his study on spiders). This leader not only brought church and cultural reformation

but was an acclaimed revivalist/theologian who actually became the president of Princeton University before he died.

Abraham Kuyper was also a notable theologian who became a pastor, started a denomination and university, and eventually became the Prime Minister of the Netherlands.

Time and space forbid me from also illustrating the lives of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and other theologians who turned their worlds upside down. Paul the Apostle, our greatest theologian, did not do a bad job transforming the world either! Who said theologians and theology are irrelevant?

For more reading regarding this topic:

The Faith: Given Once, for All What Christians Believe, Why They Believe It, and Why It Matters by Charles Colson & Harold Fickett

No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? by David F. Wells.

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