



# ***In Defense Of Preaching***

## ***Part 1: Why Preaching Is Being Abandoned By The Church***

**by Jim Osman**  
**Pastor/Teacher**  
**Kootenai Community Church**  
**kootenaichurch.org**

I have known many preachers. I have known many good preachers, many bad preachers and only a few excellent preachers. Of the "good" or "excellent" preachers I have met or become acquainted with over my lifetime, I do not know of one who believes their preaching is either "good" or "excellent."

Toward the end of his life, Spurgeon, known as the *Prince of Preachers*, said that he had only come close to true preaching a few times in all his ministry. The great preacher of the 20th Century, Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, said, "*I am conscious of my inadequacies and my failings as I have been trying to preach for all these years.*"<sup>1</sup>

In that vein, let me begin with my own confession: I am well aware of my **own** inadequacies in preaching. In fact, I am more aware of them than anyone else! Those who sit and listen to the preaching of the Word from the pulpit at Kootenai Community Church week after week will be able to quickly identify my quirks, idiosyncrasies, and failings. Trust me; if you were to compose a list, it wouldn't compare to mine!

I say that not in order to class myself with either Lloyd-Jones or Spurgeon. I certainly would not! Rather, I wish to make plain that any critique or criticism of the state of preaching in the modern evangelical church is not offered from a platform of self-aggrandized superiority.

I am in no way awed by my own abilities, spiritual gift, or grasp of the craft to which I devote myself. Any man who has ever been called to teach or preach has

felt the weight of the divine command to "**preach the Word**" (2 Timothy 4:2) and has trembled at the realization that he will receive a "**stricter judgment**" (James 3:1) when Christ shall return and "**judge the living and the dead**" at "**His appearing and His Kingdom.**"

Any man called to preach will be able to agree with John Stott when he says, "*I confess that in the pulpit I am often seized with 'communication frustration', for a message burns within me, but I am unable to convey to others what I am thinking, let alone feeling. And seldom if ever do I leave the pulpit without a sense of partial failure, a mood of penitence, a cry to God for forgiveness, and a resolve to look to Him for grace to do better in the future.*"<sup>2</sup>

However, I am vexed by the current state of preaching in the evangelical church in America, a fact I have not kept from sharing on multiple occasions. I do not hesitate to confess that I have a **very** high view of preaching and its centrality to the life and health of the church. My high view of preaching is a consequence of my high view of Scripture—a connection I will elaborate on in a future article.

### **The Current Trend**

It is not an exaggeration to say that the current trend of the North American church is away from biblical preaching.<sup>3</sup> The marketing gurus of today's church

<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 9.

<sup>2</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 9.

<sup>3</sup> I believe that the only philosophy of preaching that can rightly be called "biblical" is expository preaching. I will define and defend that

confidently declare that the era of exposition is over. Preaching is not just believed to be a dying art, but a dead art incapable of communicating eternal truths to this television-, billboard-, sound clip-, video game-saturated world in which we live.

It is a rarity to find a church in which the sermon is longer than 15-20 minutes, explains any major doctrine of Scripture, or offers anything deeper than personal anecdotal stories, self-help tips, jokes, or movie clips. You are more likely to find a church doing a series of messages based on popular rock songs of the 80s, sitcoms of the 90s, or last summer's movie blockbusters than you are to find a church preaching through a book of the Bible.

It is not called the "sermon" any more, nor "preaching," but instead we have the "conversation," the "dialog," the "quiet talk," or even just the "talk" at the end of the service. The sermon takes a back seat to an extended music set, the drama team, and almost any other distraction that can be dreamed up to fill the time.

Preaching in its biblical form is becoming passé, and quickly. The preaching of the Word is no longer the central feature of Western Christianity, and that can only be so to the detriment of the church's spiritual life and health.

### **Has It Always Been So?**

The centrality of preaching has always been the distinguishing mark of the Christian church in every generation since Pentecost. The early Christians took their cue from the Old Testament and their Lord.

The practice of assembling the people of God together to hear the Word of the Lord goes back well into Old Testament times. Moses gave the law to the priests with instruction to read it (and presumably explain it) to all the people, including the children (**Deut. 31:9-13; Malachi 2:7-9**). Ezra, the priest and scribe of the law, brought the law of Moses out before the people who were assembled together. Ezra read the law, and other teachers translated the words to the people "to give the sense so that they understood the

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assertion in a future article.

reading" (**Nehemiah 8:1-8**). The Old Testament prophets proclaimed and taught the Word of God to the people. Their ministry was not just one of foretelling events, but mostly and mainly forth-telling the Word of God. They proclaimed, explained, and applied God's Word for the people.

Jesus was first and foremost a preacher. Mark, in his gospel, introduces Jesus saying, "**Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God**" (**Mk. 1:14**). His ministry is repeatedly described as "teaching" and "preaching" (**Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:39**). In the gospel of John, Jesus is seen laying heavy and repeated emphasis on the words that He spoke (**5:24, 47; 6:63; 14:23-24**).<sup>4</sup>

In the New Testament church, we find from the earliest days an emphasis on the Word of God and preaching. The book of Acts is, among other things, a record of the preaching of the Apostles. The early Christians met in the temple daily to hear the teaching of the Apostles (**Acts 2:41-47**). Paul's ministry was primarily characterized by teaching and preaching (**Acts 20:20-21**), an emphasis he was careful to pass on to those who followed in his steps (**2 Tim. 4:1-5**). The Apostles had their priorities right when they selected the ministry of the Word of God and prayer over caring for the physical needs of the people (**Acts 6**).

Church history is further testimony to the centrality of preaching to the life and health of the church. The period of the Reformation of the 1500s was marked by a heavy emphasis on the preaching of the Word and the role of a pastor to teach Scripture to God's people - a practice that had been long neglected prior to the Reformation. The reformers believed that the "*first and major mark of a true church was the faithful preaching of the Word.*"<sup>5</sup> They did not believe that a true church existed where the Word of God was not proclaimed.

As Lloyd-Jones so aptly stated, "*Is it not clear, as you take a bird's-eye view of Church history, that the decadent periods and eras in the history of the Church have always been those periods when preaching had*

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4 If you want an interesting study, read through the Gospel of John and take note of every reference to "speak," "word," "words," "say," and "spoken." You will find Jesus mentioning this theme *dozens* of times!

5 Stott, 25.

*declined? What is it that always heralds the dawn of a Reformation or of a Revival? It is renewed preaching."*<sup>6</sup>

The great periods of spiritual health in church history have been accompanied by strong, biblical preaching. Likewise, the low points have been characterized by a lack of biblical preaching.

We must conclude that, "*Since the health of the Christian and of the Church depends on the Word of God, the preaching and teaching of it is both the most important part of divine service and the highest and only duty and obligation of every bishop<sup>7</sup>, pastor, and preacher.*"<sup>8</sup>

Do you ever wonder what to look for in a church? The answer is simple: if the Word of God is not preached biblically, then it is not a church, but merely a social gathering of people. If you want to find a church, you must find a gathering of God's people where the Word is rightly preached; for when the Word of God is rightly preached, the voice of God is rightly heard.

### **Why the Change?**

Surely this modern move away from biblical preaching (exposition) cannot bode well for the health of the church. What is behind it? Why are churches abandoning biblical preaching?

First, I believe it is because the church has adopted a low view of Scripture. You cannot have great preaching if you do not have a great message. If one does not believe in the authority of Scripture, then he will not preach authoritatively. If he does not believe that Scripture is infallible and without error, then he will not preach with confidence. If he does not believe that the Bible communicates a message that **must** be believed, and **must** be preached because it is the very words of the Living God, then he will not preach with passion.

Christians seem to view the Bible as the ultimate *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*, rather than the living, enduring, abiding, authoritative, inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of the Almighty Living God. Simply put, Scripture does not occupy in the hearts of

6 Lloyd-Jones, 24.

7 Or "elder."

8 Stott, 24.

God's people the place it once did. The church today views the Bible as a collection of stories, quotes, and anecdotes.

Modern preaching reflects this view of Scripture. Pastors today do not spend their weeks studying one passage in order to explain and apply its meaning on Sunday morning. They spend more time searching books and the Internet for stories along a certain theme, coming up with cute jokes and quotes to fill time. The Bible is used to fill in some of the needs for good quotes on a certain theme.

Other preaching consists of merely a rambling diatribe, or an incoherent collection of human wisdom which the Bible seems to support. When a pastor loses his high view of Scripture, he will inevitably move away from expository preaching. Inevitably!

I can listen to a man preach and tell you how he views Scripture. He may affirm the most orthodox of doctrinal statements, and have an orthodox doctrine of the Bible, but if he does not "**handle accurately the Word of Truth**" (2 Tim. 2:15), and explain the text of Scripture accurately so that the voice of God can be heard through the Word of God, I can tell you with confidence, he has a low view of Scripture! If he minimizes the centrality of biblical text in the sermon, he has a low view of Scripture.

Connected to this low view of Scripture is the church's wrong view of authority. The postmodern movement has ravaged the church, leaving it without any source of authority. Postmodernism says that there is no objective truth, and in fact, truth in any sense cannot be known at all. The Emergent Church Movement has embraced this postmodern notion of truth wholeheartedly, teaching that nobody can know for certain what any given text of Scripture means. According to them, all interpretations are just constructs of our own limited minds, and we have no way of knowing if what we think about God, the Bible, or truth is in any way accurate or reliable.

Instead of standing on the authority of Scripture and believing in its absolute veracity, the church has bowed to the winds of postmodernism and adopted the relativistic, subjective worldview of this culture.

When the belief in absolute truth vanishes, so will

preaching that proclaims absolute truth. When the Bible is no longer viewed as the sufficient authoritative source for all truth, we will get preaching that is soft, inoffensive, subjective, and pliable to the views of any person. Gone will be expositions of any complex, deep, or profound doctrines. Gone will be any mention of sin, righteousness, and judgment to come. What we will get is mealy-mouthed treatments of felt needs that offend no one.

A third reason that the church is abandoning preaching is due to a wrong idea of what constitutes biblical preaching. Some churches view the sermon as a necessary evil, something to be endured after a great uplifting singing time. Some pastors see the sermon as their opportunity to promote themselves or the church, or to make extensive announcements concerning church events.

Some think that preaching is the God-ordained method of addressing the hottest political, cultural, or entertainment issues of the day. Some think the sermon should be a light-hearted treatment of some felt need to *slowly* (and I mean slowly) introduce religious ideas to unbelievers. Others think the sermon is a performance of one man that is to be evaluated by the audience. Still others think the sermon is designed to market Christianity to the world and should be crafted in such a way as to overcome consumer resistance and "make the sale" or "close the deal."

All baloney!

A fourth reason that the church seems to be abandoning preaching is that some men simply refuse to obey Scripture. Though pastors are commanded to "preach the Word," some simply refuse to do so. Believing that God does not know the most effective method to reach unbelievers or to feed the sheep, they are arrogant enough to think that they can devise a method that is more suited to our culture--that they know better than Jesus, Paul, or Timothy.

Certainly, they reason, if Paul were writing today, he would not give such archaic, outmoded advice. (Notice how their view of Scripture shines through in that sentiment?!) They refuse to believe that God has spoken on this subject definitively, and instead opt for the latest craze or fad which is blowing through the

church.

So whether it is a deficient view of Scripture, an absent view of authority, an ignorance of preaching itself, or an outright sinful rebellion against the counsel of God, we are left with a famine for the Word of God (**Amos 8:11**) in the land.

The cure is preaching. God's people thrive on preaching. Nothing else satisfies the true God-given hunger of the human soul. Without it, God's people starve spiritually and languish in weakness.

I believe that the greatest need of the church today is not revival, reformation, prayer, power, evangelism, or political involvement. The greatest need of the hour in the modern church is a return to the faithful, biblical proclamation of the Word of God. More on that in upcoming articles.

Without Wax-



"The standard of preaching in the modern world is deplorable. There are few great preachers. Many clergy do not seem to believe in it anymore as a powerful way in which to proclaim the gospel and change the life. This is the age of the sermonette: and sermonettes make Christianettes. Much of the current uncertainty about the gospel and the mission of the Church must be due to a generation of preachers which has lost confidence in the Word of God, and no longer takes the trouble to study it in depth and to proclaim it without fear or favor."

- John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*

"It is no secret that Christ's Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, 'junk food'; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God (**Amos 8:11**) continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church."

- Walt Kaiser, *Toward An Exegetical Theology*