



# ***In Defense Of Preaching***

## ***Part 2: The Theology Behind Preaching***

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In Part 1 I bemoaned the fact that the church in western evangelicalism seems bent on abandoning biblical preaching.<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that churches are no longer filling time with a man standing (or sitting on a stool) behind a pulpit (or a music stand) before (or surrounded by) a group of people and talking about spiritual, or even biblical issues or topics. I would, however, contend that what passes as a "sermon" in the vast majority of churches is anything other than biblical preaching.

Before you stop reading and write me off as an arrogant extremist of some sort, allow me the chance to define and defend biblical preaching. I believe that a main reason many churches are abandoning biblical preaching is simply a lack of understanding what constitutes true "biblical preaching."

### **A Theological Enterprise**

My convictions regarding preaching are theologically driven. I have an uncompromising commitment to expository preaching (I will define this in a moment) for theological reasons, not personal or philosophical ones.

Some may suggest that I am committed to expository preaching merely because it is the most comfortable for me and I am not willing to try new things. Or some might charge that the other elders demand this and I lack the fortitude to stand up. Still others may think that I am merely a product of my Bible college training and I am not creative enough to find a

new approach.

I believe preaching is first and foremost a **theological** enterprise. A sound theology of preaching is the starting point in any discussion concerning what constitutes Biblical preaching. Theology must come first.

Preaching is not simply a matter of "technique." It is not mastering a proper posture, learning certain gestures and using voice inflection. Nor does preaching consist of putting together a proper outline. Those things are helpful as far as they go, but learning technique can make a man a good orator. Theology makes him a good preacher. There is a vast difference between orators and preachers.

Preaching is therefore a theological enterprise.

All sermons **must** have theological content. There is a tendency in our day to stay away from doctrine and theology. It is said that theology divides rather than unites. Further, it is claimed, those who attend churches today are not interested in theological preaching. They want "practical" help that theological sermons do not offer.

This is a canard since nothing is more practical than sound theology. What is more helpful to a marriage than getting God's truth - a theology of marriage. Most problems are the result of believing and acting upon bad theology or lies the enemy has sown. Good theology leads to good works and sound living.

The Bible is a book of theological propositions and truths. All true theology must come from Scripture. So, the degree to which a sermon avoids theology is the degree to which it must also avoid Scripture. A

<sup>1</sup> Past articles can be found archived online in PDF format at our website: [www.kootenaichurch.org](http://www.kootenaichurch.org).

commitment to avoid theology in preaching will certainly result in a widespread ignorance concerning what the Bible teaches regarding God, His plan, His redemption, and man's true need.

The second sense in which preaching is a theological enterprise is that all biblical preaching is birthed in certain theological convictions. My philosophy of preaching, my commitment to exposition, is **theologically** driven.

### **The Convictions**

First, I hold to certain convictions about Scripture. I believe the Bible<sup>2</sup> to be the written, verbally inerrant, infallible, living, abiding, powerful Word of the Living God. I believe it to contain **all** the Word of God and to be inspired in **all** its content.<sup>3</sup> I believe that God has spoken in this book alone. If I want to hear God speak, I must read Scripture. If I want to know the mind of God on any subject, I can find it in the Bible.

I think it is accurate to say, from this first conviction, that the role of a preacher is not to give **his** modern testimony about Jesus, but to relay with faithfulness and accuracy the testimony **already given** - that in the Word of God. The preacher's role is not to offer his own thoughts on the revelation, his own musings on today's culture and relevant topics. His task is to herald the Word.

Second, I believe that in Scripture God still speaks through what He has said. This is the heart of the issue. Not only has God spoken once and for all, but through the Word **He continues** to speak today. If we say that God spoke and leave it at that, then we "*give the impression that He Who spoke centuries ago is silent today; and that the only word we can hear from Him comes out of a book, a faint echo from the distant past, smelling strongly of the mold of libraries.*"<sup>4</sup>

Does God still speak today? **Yes.** A thousand times, **YES!** He speaks through His Word, not a still, small

voice, but the voice of a preacher who heralds God's message in the pages of Scripture. It is not through a mental impression, but through His Word; read, explained, and applied to the life of the hearer.

Understanding this central truth protects us from the belief that though God's voice was heard in ancient times, He is silent today with nothing to say to us in our context or culture. It also protects us from the disastrous results of seeking to hear God speak apart from Scripture through some subjective, personal, existential modern revelation.

#### ***It is through what He spoke that He speaks.***

When the Word of God is rightly preached, the voice of God is truly heard. The preacher, then, is not someone who dreams up novel modern ideas and seeks a text to hang them on, but a man called, gifted, commissioned by God to proclaim that which God has already written and borne witness to. He stands between the Word of God and the people of God to convey the truth of God to the children of God through preaching.

The more clearly the text is explained and applied, the more clearly the voice of God is heard. Since the Bible is living and powerful, since it is God's Word, and since God speaks through what He spoke, then the task of the preacher is not to invent the message, but to deliver and explain that which the Lord has given to him.

I cannot help but think that much preaching in our day is weak and insipid because those who stand in the pulpits of our land do not share these theological convictions regarding the Word of God.

They are then left in their own strength, and by their own creativity and ingenuity to constantly dream up new and creative ways to draw and hold a crowd. They have to conjure up a new message week after week, hoping that they can deliver something of power and importance. He who sticks with Scripture has no such reservations or hesitations.

As Professor Gustaf Wingren writes, "*The expositor [preacher] is only to provide mouth and lips for the passage itself, so that the Word may advance. . . The really great preachers . . . are, in fact, only the servants of the Scriptures. When they have spoken for a time. . . the Word . . . gleams within the passage itself and is*

2 These statements apply to the original autographs and not to any one particular translation of the original autographs.

3 For our full doctrinal statement concerning the Bible, see ***We Believe: The Doctrinal Statement of Kootenai Community Church*** posted on our website at [www.kootenaichurch.org](http://www.kootenaichurch.org).

4 *Between Two Worlds* by John Stott (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans), pg. 100.

*listened to: the voice makes itself heard. . . The passage itself is the voice, the speech of God; the preacher is the mouth and the lips, and the congregation. . . the ear in which the voice sounds. . . . Only in order that the Word may advance - may go out into the world, and force its way through enemy walls to the prisoners within - is preaching necessary.*"<sup>5</sup>

The preacher or teacher's overriding concern, then, is that the voice of God be heard clearly and accurately. He who believes that he must communicate God's message and not his own will handle the Scriptures with the utmost fidelity and accuracy.

When a preacher is convinced that in the act of preaching, God's voice is being heard in the text, he will tremble before the Almighty at the weight of that responsibility! Gone will be the trivial, irreverent, anecdotal, silly talks that pass as "preaching" in most churches. Gone will be all the discussions about "relevancy" and "cultural awareness." Gone will be the hirelings who spend their weeks pursuing the latest church growth fad. Gone will be trivial, irreverent pastors who are nothing more than boys playing church.

Matthew Simpson gave an admirable summary of the uniqueness of the preaching event: *"His throne is the pulpit; he stands in Christ's stead; his message is the Word of God; around him are immortal souls; the Savior, unseen, is beside him, the Holy Spirit broods over the congregation; angels gaze upon the scene, and Heaven and Hell await the issue. What associations, and what vast responsibility."*<sup>6</sup>

### **Biblical Preaching Defined**

I have made reference in these articles to "biblical preaching." That is a redundancy of sorts. For there is certainly no such thing as "unbiblical preaching." The instant a message becomes unbiblical, it ceases by definition to be "preaching." We may then describe what is delivered as a "commentary," "oration," or a "talk," but it most certainly is not a "sermon," nor could it in any way be described as "preaching."

I would agree with John Stott when he says, *"It is my*

<sup>5</sup> Stott, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Stott, 82.

*contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching."*<sup>7</sup> That seems a little narrow and arrogant to some, but that is due to a misunderstanding of what is meant by "expository" or "exposition."

If by "exposition" you think I mean "a running commentary that blandly moves from word to word and verse to verse without any unity or outline to the thoughts," you are mistaken. It is not reading a passage until some devotional thought jumps off the page at the preacher that "reminds him of something that happened to him one time" and serves as a jumping-off point for anecdotal stories and life lessons.

An "exposition" is an "explanation." Exposition is defined by Webster as *"a discourse to convey information or explain what is difficult to understand."*<sup>8</sup> An expositor is an explainer.

When you apply that word to preaching, it means that an expositor is one who *"explains Scripture by laying open the text to public view in order to set forth its meaning, explain what is difficult to understand, and make appropriate application."*<sup>9</sup>

An **expository** sermon is an **explanatory** sermon in which the meaning of the text is **exposed** and **explained** to the hearer. This is what preaching is—**nothing else.**

To preach the Word is to explain what a text of Scripture says. That's it. The Word is what preachers are called to preach (**2 Timothy 4:1-5**). A preacher either preaches the Word or something else. If it is the Word, then he can only do one thing with it, and that is to explain it. If he is not going to explain the Bible, then what, pray tell, is he to do with it? Why is he standing before people?

To explain the Bible is to exposit the Bible; to exposit the Bible is to preach the Bible. Expository preaching, then, is simply this: an explanation of a biblical text to the hearer. Admittedly that is boiled down to its irreducible minimum, but that is exposition at its very core.

<sup>7</sup> Stott, 125.

<sup>8</sup> *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1988), 438.

<sup>9</sup> *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing The Science And Art of Biblical Exposition* by John MacArthur, Jr. and the Masters Seminary Faculty (Dallas: Word Publishing), 10-11.

There is only one way to preach the Bible, and that is to explain it. An explanation is an exposition. **True biblical preaching is expository preaching.** The only biblical sermon is the one in which the Bible speaks for itself. It is in this way that the voice of God is heard today—when the Bible is rightly preached, the voice of God is truly heard.

### **What People Want**

People today are desperate to hear from God! Blind, lost sinners seek for answers in religious book after religious book. They are hungry to know their destiny and so they consult horoscopes, astrologers, and fortune tellers. They want to know about life after death and so they consult spiritists.

People need to hear the Word of God in this desperate hour, and the church is busy abandoning the only vehicle through which the voice of God is truly heard: the explanation (or exposition) of Scripture. What a tragedy!

There is a famine in the land, not for bread or water, but for the Word of God. Not one church in a hundred today is committed to the accurate, diligent, faithful, and passionate teaching of Scripture. Yet, the true sheep will always hunger for the true Word. Goats will be content to feed on weeds, but God's people hunger for more. They want the pure milk of the Word, that they might grow by it (1 Peter 2:1).

### **Unbiblical Preaching**

As I already said, to label a "sermon" as "unbiblical preaching" is a redundancy. Much of what passes for "sermons" among contemporary preachers is anything but true preaching.

A man may be a great orator, with a dynamic stage presence and an ability to hold an audience captive by speaking to all their felt needs. Yet he may do all of this and never once explain a passage of Scripture. He may read Scripture. He may quote several verses. He may even pause upon a phrase in that reading and offer some thoughts. He may do all of this and never preach.

Some are like the very bold "preacher" who read his

text at the beginning of the sermon and then boldly announced, "That is my text. I am now going to preach. Maybe we'll meet again, my text and I, and maybe not." Many "sermons" fit that description—something delivered by a preacher without ever running into the text.

Dr. Benjamin Jowett, master of Balliol College in Oxford, once declared that it was his habit to write his sermons, and then choose a text as a peg on which to hang them.<sup>10</sup>

Many men today collect stories, quotes, and anecdotes around a certain theme and then sprinkle their musings with various Bible verses.

The above examples have one thing in common: the text is the servant of the sermon. The sermons described may be theologically accurate in content, they may be sprinkled with Bible verses, they may advance Christian ideals and principles, but they are not examples of Biblical preaching.

### **In Biblical preaching, the sermon is the servant of the text and NOT the other way around.**

The preacher is bound by the text. He is handcuffed to it. Both the preacher and the sermon are servants of the text. The text determines all that is to be said and explained. Biblical preaching begins with the text, continues with the text, and ends with the text. The text does not serve to support the main idea of the sermon. Rather the main idea of the sermon is derived from a study of the text, and is itself an explanation of the text, so that the central message of the sermon is the central message of the text.

When the message of the text is the message of the sermon, then God's voice is heard. When the Bible is rightly preached, the voice of God is truly heard. Not because the preacher is in any way inspired, but because the preacher has exposed the people to the voice of God in the text.

The preacher is responsible to allow the text to speak for itself. His job is to be a faithful herald who reads the Word and explains it to the people, not someone who crafts his own message and then sprinkles it with biblical allusions and references in

<sup>10</sup> Stott, 130.

order that it might be called a "sermon." He must preach in such a way that the "*meaning of the Bible passage is presented **entirely and exactly** as it was intended by God.*"<sup>11</sup>

The tragedy of our day is the belief among church leaders that allowing the Bible to speak for itself is not gripping enough, relevant enough, and interesting enough to hold the attention of the average congregation. Hence, there is a rush among pastors to try to adorn their preaching with all kinds of creative tricks including drama, song, dance, and video clips. It seems that they "*find the Bible flat, so they try to freshen it up with their own effervescence. Others find it insipid, so they try to season it with a little of their own relish. They are unwilling to take it as it is; they are forever trying to improve it with bright ideas of their own. . . . For the attempt to make 'it' more acceptable really means to make 'ourselves' more acceptable, and this is the lust for popularity.*"<sup>12</sup>

### **How Can I Tell?**

I am asked from time to time, "How can I tell if I am attending a good church or not?" I reply, "The preaching. You must find a church where the Word of God is proclaimed with clarity and authority, Sunday after Sunday."<sup>13</sup>

I then will offer a series of questions that someone should ask after walking away from the worship service: (1) What passage of Scripture (singular!)<sup>14</sup> did the preacher preach on? (2) Do I understand (as a result of the sermon) the meaning of that passage? (3) Do I understand (as a result of the sermon) the context of the passage? (4) Was the sermon a servant of the

11 MacArthur, Jr., pg. 23-24. Emphasis in the original.

12 Stott, 323.

13 By the way, **only** expository preaching does that! If the sermon serves the text by explaining it and exposing it to the people, if the text is king, then the sermon will be both clear and authoritative. The moment one strays from expository preaching, he is no longer giving the text clarity by explaining its meaning, and he is no longer serving the text, but is using the text to serve his own ends. It will therefore lack both clarity and authority. Exposition makes the text clear and keeps the text as the authority.

14 I recognize that it is possible to have a topical expository message which would exposit more than one passage of Scripture. This should be the exception rather than the rule. Remember, the preacher is there to explain the text. The question is, "which text?"

text, or was the Bible used to prop up the sermon?

There is nothing more disgraceful than a preacher who tries to play fast and loose with the Word of God, being sloppy in the passage, twisting Scripture, and distorting its meaning and authority.

The unprincipled text-twisting on the part of preachers reminded R.W. Dale of the conjurers of his day and prompted him to say, "*I always think of the tricks of those ingenious gentlemen who entertain the public by rubbing a sovereign between their hands till it becomes a canary, and drawing out of their coat sleeves half-a-dozen brilliant glass globes filled with water, and with four or five goldfish swimming in each of them. For myself, I like to listen to a good preacher, and I have no objection in the world to be amused by the tricks of a clever conjuror; but I prefer to keep the conjuring and the preaching separate: conjuring on Sunday morning, conjuring in church, conjuring with texts of Scripture, is not quite to my taste.*"<sup>15</sup>

Without Wax -



*"And so one has seen fashions and vogues and stunts coming one after another in the Church. Each one creates great excitement and enthusiasm and is loudly advertised as the thing that is going to fill the churches, the thing that is going to solve the problem. They have said that about every single one of them. But in a few years they have forgotten all about it, and another stunt comes along, or another new idea; somebody has hit upon the one thing needful or he has a psychological understanding of modern man. Here is the thing, and everybody rushes after it; but soon it wanes and disappears and something else takes its place." Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Preaching and Preachers (35)*

15 Stott, 131-132.