



In Defense Of Preaching

Part 4: Dangers, Disasters, and Dividends

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Originally this series of articles on preaching was intended to be a three-part series. However, after the three installments, I felt that this series would not be complete without addressing a few different random but connected subjects. None of these really justified an entire article on its own; at least not at this point. So I am offering them here in a collection that may in some ways be cohesive, and in some ways rather eclectic. We could call this "Random Thoughts on Preaching," or we could go with the subtitle that all preachers have to love: "Dangers, Disasters and Dividends." Don't you just love alliteration?

Dangers

Preaching is a perilous activity fraught with danger on every side. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that the enemy of our souls would love to destroy every faithful preacher in the land. I believe that Satan loves to distract and destroy those who preach and teach the Word. He knows the power that is in the Word preached and the benefit to God's people when the Word is expounded. He would love to eliminate that, and it is only divine protection afforded by God that stems the tide of his murderous hatred.

Preachers face danger not only from Satan but from self. There are many temptations to which those who preach or teach the Word are especially susceptible, due to their craft.

First, there is the temptation of pride. Every preacher has to battle pride. If a man says he never struggles with pride, he is a prideful liar! The devil loves to

suggest to the preacher that he is the most gifted man in the church, if not the city. The flesh of the preacher loves to believe him! Such thoughts, when entertained, allow the preacher to elevate himself and begin to think of himself as greater than he ought.

Quickly he forgets that the gifts, the skills, the calling are not his own, but are given by God. Slowly and subtly he is led away from dependence on the Spirit, and the motives for preaching and teaching shift from the glory of God to the grandeur of self.

Second, there is the temptation to apply worldly means to measure the success of ministry. I have to say that this a major, if not **the** major, stumbling block of our day. Those outside of pastoral ministry are not likely to know or understand the pressure that is exerted on pastors to measure their ministry in terms of numbers. I thought "peer pressure" would end with high school. Little did I know that it would follow me into ministry.

Church conferences, church growth seminars, and nearly every preaching tool and fad are marketed to pastors and churches with the promise that adopting the latest trend, gimmick, or church growth philosophy is a sure guarantee of success. How might that "success" be measured? The advertisements are almost certain to offer a testimonial from a satisfied customer/pastor who will testify that their church went from 200 to 1,000 almost overnight. The unspoken but ever-present assumption is that the successful preacher is the one who draws enormous crowds week after week.

I faced this pressure early in my pastoral experience.

I used to go to the local Christian Worker's Conference in Spokane (a conference that touted dozens of workshops every year on how to guarantee and sustain growth and success and is, ironically, no more), and attend workshops on leadership and pragmatic approaches to ministry and preaching. After about three years of imbibing the latest from church growth gurus, I came to a crossroads.

I realized that I could either pursue every fad that blew across the evangelical landscape, implement a continuing rotation of “studies” and programs certain to grow the church, and measure myself by the standards of an impotent American Evangelicalism, or I could simply “preach the Word.” That might sound like an oversimplification at first, but I had reached the conclusion that “growing the church” was not my responsibility. Preaching the Word was. It became increasingly obvious to me that a commitment to church growth fads and a commitment to preach the Word, feed the sheep, and equip the saints could not co-exist.

I don't know where I first read it, but I quickly adopted this philosophy as my own: “You fill the pulpit and let God fill the pews.” Whether Kootenai Community Church has 150 people or 1500 people is not my concern. My concern is to give myself fully to the exposition of Scripture and to preach Christ. I am very thankful that the Lord directed my steps in such a way as to preserve me from fascination with church growth strategies and church marketing drivel.

Disasters

I have on many occasions and in many fashions been critical of men who make a hash of preaching. I have stood against anything that is not faithful to Scripture or an exposition of the text. That may lead some to conclude that I don't think I have ever failed in the pulpit, or that I view my own preaching as so excellently worthy of praise as to be the standard against which all others are to be judged.

That is certainly not the case! In truth, I wouldn't walk across the street to hear myself preach! I hate the sound of my own voice and can't bear to listen to myself on a CD.

I am aware of my own failings, and seldom do I finish

preaching or teaching without immediately following with some heartfelt repentance for my own inadequacies, failings, shortcomings, and lack of abilities. Trust me, I know them full well.

Allow me to share a few of my own “disasters” which you may or may not have had the misfortune of enduring. There are a number of sermons for which I am not looking forward to giving an account.

For instance, the first three times I preached was here at Kootenai Community Church. It was between my first and second year of Bible college in August. I was preparing to go back to college for second year and I asked Dave Kinne if I could do a three-part series of messages on 1 John. It was a book I had been studying through the summer on my own. He consented, and I set about the task of preparing three sermons on 1 John.

Yes, you read that right. I covered the whole book of 1 John in three messages. Three! There was no missing decimal point! Three. Those messages had all the depth of a puddle of spilled milk. In fact, about the only difference between those three messages and spilled milk is that the messages were definitely worth crying over.

My three messages in 1 John focused on three prominent themes of the epistle: “God is Light,” “God is Love,” and “God is Life” (**1 John 1:5; 4:16; 5:20**). The whole epistle in three sermons. Utterly pathetic! Time does not permit me to tell you of the lame attempts at humor, the rambling reading of long passages of Scripture, the inarticulate “ums” and long pauses, and losing my place in my notes. Argh!

After I started pastoring, I did a series from Nehemiah titled “Profile of a Visionary.” It was a 12- week series of messages selected from Nehemiah in which I missed the point of the text by more than a mile.

I tried to combine “exposition” and “The Prayer of Jabez” and ended up with a five-week series of messages that would make a pirate gag.

For me, my most memorable disaster was a “Christmas message” I preached during my third year of Bible college while home on Christmas vacation. And here I have truly saved my best for last.

My text was **Matthew 2:12**, “**And having been**

warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.”

The text is, of course, describing the magi and their visit to Jesus after his birth. They had presented their gifts and worshiped, then “having been warned” not to go back to Herod, they departed for home “another way.”

I took the phrase “left for their own country by another way” and spring-boarded off that to an entire message which had nothing to do with the Christmas narrative at all. In fact, I used those words to show that once someone meets Jesus (as the magi had) they will forever be changed (go another way). They did not leave the same way that they came! Get it?! Isn't that clever? No! That is dreadful! That is a dog's breakfast and a train wreck all rolled into one! It was an utter misrepresentation of the text and a classic example of an imbecile (me) using the text as a peg on which to hang his own thoughts and clever ideas. I totally missed the point of the text.

Needless to say, I am not looking forward to standing before the Lord and answering for those messages. He certainly won't get any argument from me, nor will I be surprised when He says, “Jim, what were you thinking?” I will only say, “Lord, I agree completely. That was a disaster! You don't have to tell me that was horrible, I know!”

As I was describing each one of these, I noticed something. All these disasters have one thing in common--they all represent either a total twisting of the text (e.g. **Matt. 2:12**), or a lack of communicating clearly the meaning of the text (e.g. **Nehemiah**), or a pathetically shallow treatment of the text (**1 John**).

This series of articles is in defense of *expository preaching*. Expository preaching has to do with how a man handles the text. It is because these messages were not faithful and true representations of the text that they qualify as disasters.

The measure of a preacher is not his articulateness, his ability to work the crowd, his voice fluctuation, or even his ability to hold an audience spellbound. In the end, the measure of a preacher will be: Did he faithfully and truly present the meaning of the text?

He may stumble over his words, or create new ones on the spot! He may lose his place in his notes, or in his

mind if he doesn't use notes. He may forget large amounts of his message, forget to give a great illustration, or stutter. I have done all these a hundred times!

Though these all remind me of how inadequate I am, and how dependent I am upon God, and how hard I need to study, prepare, and work to avoid them, these failings do not a disaster make.

Failing to preach the Word, to study and represent the text, to present the Word of God as originally given is a sin, a failing so grievous that no amount of charisma, charm, stage presence, articulateness, polish, Powerpoint, leadership ability, or church growth savvy will compensate.

Dividends

Throughout this series of articles, I have mentioned a number of different benefits of expository preaching. I think if the Church were to return to regular, faithful, diligent, authoritative, and passionate explanation of Scripture, many--if not most--of her ills would simply vanish.

I can think of no better way to close this discussion on the subject of preaching than by listing some of the benefits of expository preaching to the preacher, the listener, and the world.

Expository preaching forces the preacher to study and expose himself to various texts of Scripture. It protects him from the temptation of always beating the same old dead horses. It forces the pastor and congregation to come to grips with difficult passages. I have been forced to study, interpret, and teach some of the most difficult passages in the entire Bible as a result of studying through books. Ephesians, 1 Peter, Acts, and Philippians have forced us to deal with passages that present some of the most difficult interpretive challenges in the NT.

Exposition reveals the full counsel of God to the people of God rather than the “subject of the week” or the “felt need of the month.”

Exposition keeps the Word of God as the authority in the Church, requiring that both leaders and the rest of the congregation submit themselves to it. It allows the

voice of God to be heard by the people of God. It exposes both the preacher and the hearer to the sanctifying influence of the Word of God--something missing in sermons that do not stick to the text.

Expository preaching makes worship on Sunday mornings possible and meaningful. The Word of God and worship are indissolubly linked to one another. All worship is an intelligent and loving response to God as He has revealed himself in Scripture. Exposition displays the glory of God and calls God's people to worship Him in Spirit and truth.

As John Stott said, *"Far from being an alien intrusion into worship, the reading and preaching of the Word are actually indispensable to it. The two cannot be divorced. Indeed, it is their unnatural divorce which accounts for the low level of so much contemporary worship. Our worship is poor because our knowledge of God is poor, and our knowledge of God is poor because our preaching is poor. But when the Word of God is expounded in its fullness, and the congregation begins to glimpse the glory of the living God, they bow down in solemn awe and joyful wonder before His throne."*¹

We cannot worship a God we do not know and we cannot know God unless we know the revelation He has given of Himself, and that is impossible for the church apart from the faithful exposition of Scripture.

Exposition feeds the sheep. God's people hunger for God's Word. Nothing else has been given to sanctify, feed, and equip God's people. The Word is designed to do this.

Exposition drives away the goats. Goats have no hunger for the Word preached. They will either get saved or leave. The worship service is not intended for unbelievers, it is not designed for unbelievers, and preaching should never cater to unbelievers. Worship, church, and preaching are for believers!

Even the world and the culture benefit from faithful exposition. How? When the Bible is expounded, then the Church is holy, strong, and healthy. When the Church is holy, strong, and healthy, then sin is restrained in the culture and the world experiences the common grace of

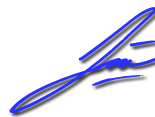
God's blessing upon His church. When the Bible is abandoned in the Church's preaching, then the Church becomes weak and the blessing is removed from her, and the world reaps the whirlwind of a nation abandoned by God.

Further, the voice of God is heard by the world on all the key issues of the day when the Bible is expounded. Preachers teach the Word of God, and thus the mind of Christ and the will of God, on every issue. The Church is then able to speak with one voice, the voice of God to the culture and the world.

American Evangelicalism is a laughingstock to the world today because preachers have abandoned their source of authority and offered instead their own insipid musings on the issues of the day and felt needs of the people.

The Word of God is powerful. Powerful to save and powerful to sanctify. Our confidence is in the Word preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the Prince of Preachers, Charles Spurgeon, is alleged to have said, *"The gospel is preached in the ears of all; it only comes with power to some. The power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher; otherwise men would be converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preacher's learning; otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were mysterious power going with it - the Holy Ghost changing the will of man. O Sirs! We might as well preach to stone walls as preach to humanity unless the Holy Ghost be with the Word, to give it power to convert the soul."*²

Without Wax -



¹ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 82-83.

² Ibid 335. Stott was unable to trace the reference for this quote.