

“A Crisis in the 21st Century Preaching: a Mandate for Biblical Exposition”

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With the success of the Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention, there was great optimism for significant changes in a number of areas of Baptist life. One of those areas was preaching. However, as we approach the 30th anniversary of this remarkable moment in Church History, it would be easy to understand why some, such as myself, are disappointed at the lack of progress in this area. To be honest, I am deeply concerned and uncertain that the tide will be turned in my lifetime. Granted, we lost not just one, but probably several generations to both a more liberal and pragmatic theological agenda. Still, we had pulpit models like W. A. Criswell, Adrian Rogers, Steven Olford, Jerry Vines, John MacArthur and Chuck Swindoll. In recent days there is James Merritt, Alistair Begg, John Piper, and David Jeremiah. However, it seems evident that the voices of “Purpose Driven,” “Seeker Sensitive,” “Narrative” and “Emerging” are winning the day in a number of regions in both the evangelical and Baptist worlds. The result: there is a greater degree of biblical and theological ignorance perhaps than in any other time in our history. We are indeed facing a crisis. A mandate for biblical exposition has never been greater.

George Barna made the point clearly in December 2003 when he reported that “only 4% of adults [in America] have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision making.” That observation, though sobering, was not shocking. However, it was his next discovery that really got our attention: “Only 9% of born again Christians have [a basic, biblical worldview].” (*Barna Update*, December 2003). What did he mean by biblical worldview? It is not a sophisticated or elaborate description.

“For the purposes of the research, a biblical worldview was defined as believing that absolute moral truths exist; that such truth is defined by the Bible; and firm belief in six specific religious views. Those views were that 1) Jesus Christ lived a sinless life; 2) God is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe and He still rules it today; 3) salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned; 4) Satan is real; 5) a Christian has a responsibility to share their faith in Christ with other people; and 6) the Bible is accurate in all of its teachings.”

-(Barna, Dec. 2003)

Boston College Professor Stephen Prothero provides a helpful perspective when writing for the *Los Angeles Times* he says:

The sociologist Peter Berger once remarked that if India is the most religious country in the world and Sweden the least, then the United States is a nation of Indian ruled by Swedes. Not anymore. With a Jesus lover in the Oval Office and the faith-based party in control of both houses of Congress [this was in Jan. 2005], the United States is undeniably a nation of believers ruled by the same. Things are different in Europe, and not just in Sweden. The Dutch are four more times less likely than Americans to believe in miracles, hell and biblical inerrancy. The euro does not trust in God. But here is the paradox: Although Americans are far more religious than Europeans, they know far less about religion ...

In Europe, religious education is the rule from the elementary grades on. So, Austrians, Norwegians and the Irish can tell you about the Seven Deadly Sins or the Five Pillars of Islam. But, according to a 1997 poll, only one out of three U. S. citizens is able to name the most basic of Christian texts, the four Gospels, and 12% think Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. That paints a picture of a nation that believes God speaks in Scripture but that can't be bothered to read what he has to say...

When Americans debated slavery, almost exclusively on the basis of the Bible, people of all races and classes could follow the debate. They could make sense of its references to the runaway slave in the New Testament book of Philemon and to the year of jubilee, when slaves could be freed, in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Today it is a rare American who can engage with any sophistication in biblically inflected arguments about gay marriage, abortion or stem cell research...

How did this happen? How did one of the most religious countries in the world become a nation of religious illiterates? Religious congregations are surely at fault. Churches and synagogues that once inculcated the "fourth R" are now telling the faithful stories "ripped from the headlines" rather than teaching them the Ten Commandments or parsing the Sermon on the Mount (which was delivered, as only one in three Americans can tell you, by Jesus).

But most of the fault lies in our elementary and secondary schools.

(Stephen Prothero, “A Nation of Faith and Religious Illiterates,”

-latime.com (1-12-05).)

I take issue only with Prothero’s last statement. The fault lies not with the schools but with the churches and, in particular, the pulpits. Walt Kaiser is exactly correct when he says, “One of the most depressing spectacles in the church today is her lack of power... At the heart of this problem is an impotent pulpit.” (p. 235-36). Seduced by the sirens of modernity we have jettisoned a word-based ministry that is expository in nature, we have, in our attempt to be popular and relevant, become foolish and irrelevant.

Skiing across the surface needs of a fallen, sinful humanity we have turned the pulpit into a pop-psychology side-show and a feel-good pit stop. We have neglected preaching the whole counsel of God’s Word and the theology of God’s Word. Too many of our people know neither the content of Scripture nor the doctrines of Scripture. Preaching the cross of Christ and the bloody atonement accomplished by His death is the exception rather than the norm. Some simply want to be cute or edgy. Others choose to focus on politics, the emotions, or relationships, and the list goes on and on. If the Bible is used at all, it is usually as a proof-text out of context with no real connection to what the speaker is saying. Many who claim and perhaps believe they are expositors betray their confession by their practice.

The words of the prophet Amos were never more piercing, “Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord GOD, “That I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine of bread, Nor a thirst for water, But of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, And from north to east; They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the

LORD, But shall not find it.” Ours is a day when people are more familiar with the characters of Star Wars, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and the contestants of American Idol than they are the men and women of Scripture.

It is disheartening when evangelicals and Southern Baptists walk the same path as the liberal and the neo-orthodox of a previous era. Claiming to believe in an infallible and inerrant Bible far too many pastors handle the Bible in a way that is sloppy and irresponsible, dishonest to the text, and a form of ministerial malpractice on their congregation. Evangelists, conference speakers, and pastors all stand guilty. In practice they say we can see people converted and brought to maturity in Christ without the consistent teaching of the whole counsel of God’s Word. Further, at least implicitly, they question the judgment of God the Holy Spirit in inspiring Scripture as we have it.

Topical preaching, narrative preaching, emerging preaching, and yes, even some types of doctrinal preaching, fundamentally suggest by their method and practice that the Holy Spirit should have packaged The Bible differently. This is spiritually ignorant at best, and arrogant at worst. Al Mohler is certainly correct when he observes, “Preaching has fallen on hard times. That’s the impression you would gain by listening to much of what passes for preaching in American pulpits. Something is clearly missing—and that missing element is the deep passion for biblical exposition that always characterizes the great preachers of an era.

-(Charles Haddon Spurgeon – A Passion for Preaching, Part One 9-20-04. Weblog)

Now the question is rightly raised: What do I mean by biblical exposition and what are the essential components for this type of preaching?

It is often said that there are as many definitions of expository preaching as there are books on the subject. This statement has only a modicum of truth. It ignores the basic fact that these various definitions, though differing at particular points, are quite similar at the foundational level. What we discover is that there actually exist a genuine consensus on what expository preaching is among those who write about it and practice it. I demonstrated this in a paper I delivered at ETS in Nov. 2004.

Drawing from complementary definitions and descriptions of expository preaching, I present my own. It is more of a description than a definition. From it, I shall develop several basic and fundamental principles, seven to be exact, that hopefully can provide a compelling case for biblical exposition in the 21st century.

“Expository preaching is text driven preaching that honors **the truth** of Scripture as it was given by the Holy Spirit.

Discovering the **God-inspired meaning** through historical-grammatical-theological investigation and interpretation, the preacher, by means of engaging and compelling proclamation, explains, illustrates and applies the meaning of the biblical text in submission to and in the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching Christ for a verdict of changed lives.”

From this description I want to develop several mandates for a preaching/teaching ministry that is true to the high view of Scripture we profess, and absolutely essential for the health of the Church in the 21st century.

1. Preaching Must Be Text-Driven So That It Truly Honors What Is In The Divine Revelation.

Mark Dever writes, “The first mark of a healthy church is expository preaching. It is not only the first mark; it is far and away the most important of them all, because if you get this one right, all of the others should follow” (*9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, p 39). Pastor Dever is absolutely right in my judgment.

Expository preaching allows the Scripture text to determine both the substance and the structure of the message. How one structures the Scriptures will determine how one structures the sermon. The Scriptural text drives and determines, shapes and forms sermon development as it relates to the explanation of the biblical text. Sidney Greidanus reminds us that,

“Biblical preaching is ‘a Bible shaped word imparted in a Bible-like way. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said.” -(*The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 11).

Allen Ross of the Beeson Divinity School concurs and adds an important warning:

“Too many so-called expositors simply make one central idea the substance of their message. [As an aside, this was the method I was taught in Seminary. In fact, my kind and godly homiletics professor criticized my two sermons delivered in preaching lab for being too wedded to the text.] The narrative may be read or retold, but the sermon is essentially their central expository idea-it is explained, illustrated, and applied without further recourse to the text. This approach is not valid

exegetical exposition. In exegetical exposition, the substance of the exposition must be clearly derived from the text so that the central idea unfolds in the analysis of the passage and so that all parts of the passage may be interpreted to show their contribution to the theological idea.”

-(*Creation and Blessing*, 47).

The faithful expositor will reject any method that would entice him to superimpose his preconceived agenda on the text. He will not use the text as a springboard to be entertaining, an approach that is far too popular in our day, especially with hit and run communicators. He will refuse to be irresponsible with Holy Scripture. Further, he will not, as Kaiser states, “[Force the] text to answer one of his favorite questions or to deal with one of the contemporary issues... that our cultures wants to have solved” (Kaiser, 153). The faithful expositor will make sure that his people hear the message of God who inspired the text and is in the text. Anything less is to be derelict in one’s pulpit ministry. Are there advantages in this method? The answer is yes and there are many. Don Carson highlights six:

1. It is the method least likely to stray from Scripture.
2. It teaches people how to read their Bible. (an emphasis of Paige Patterson for years)
3. It gives confidence to preachers and authorizes the message.
4. It meets the need for relevance without allowing the clamor for relevance to dictate the message.
5. It forces the preacher to handle the tough passages.

6. It enables the preacher to most systematically expound the whole counsel of God if sufficient chunks are handled.

Unfortunately, in our therapeutic culture, where felt needs and how-to sermons are dominant and deemed essential, even by a number of evangelicals, text-driven preaching is viewed as simply inadequate for the day. On more than one occasion I have had a mega-church pastor or a church planter, who is a friend, tell me you cannot build a church in our context on expository preaching. The perspective of many indeed is expressed well in an article entitled “What Is The Matter With Preaching?” The author writes,

“Every sermon should have for its main business the solving of some problem- a vital, important problem puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives... And if any preacher is not doing this, even though he have at his disposal both erudition and oratory, he is not functioning at all. Many preachers, for example, indulge habitually in what they call expository sermons. They take a passage from Scripture and, proceeding on the assumption that the people attending church that morning are deeply concerned about what the passage means, they spend their half hour or more on historical exposition of the verse or chapter, ending with some appended practical application to the auditors. Could any procedure be more surely predestined to dullness and futility? Who seriously supposes that, as a matter of fact, one in a hundred of the congregation cares, to start with, what Moses, Isaiah, Paul or John meant in those special

verses, or came to church deeply concerned about it? Nobody else who talks to the public so assumes that the vital interests of the people are located in the meaning of words spoken two thousand years ago. The advertisers of any goods, from a five foot shelf of classic books to the latest life insurance policy, plunge as directly as possible after the contemporary wants, felt needs, actual interests and concerns... Preachers who pick out texts from the Bible then proceed to give their historic settings, their logical meaning in the context, their place in the theology of the write, are grossly misusing the Bible. Let them not end but start with thinking of the audience's vital needs, and then let the whole sermon be organized around their endeavor to meet those needs. This is all good sense and psychology." ("What is the Matter with Preaching?" in *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1928, 135.)

Interestingly, this statement is not the musings of a contemporary pulpiteer. Its author is Harry Emerson Fosdick, who penned these words in 1928! Contemporary evangelicals need to be careful from whose homiletical stream they drink.

2. Preaching must honor the principle of authorial intent, recognizing that the ultimate author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit, God Himself.

The faithful expositor is humbled, even haunted, by the realization that when he stands to preach he stands to preach what has been given by the Holy Spirit of God. Why is he haunted? Because he understands that what is before his eyes is divinely inspired by God, and he trembles at the very thought of abusing, neglecting or altering what God Himself wrote. Yes, the Bible is best described as the Word of God written in the words

of men. However, we must never forget it is ultimately the Word of God, and the divine author's intended meaning as deposited in the text should be honored. There is a noble tradition concerning this principle. The Westminster Dictionary (of 1645) captures this well when it states, "...the true idea of preaching is that the preacher should become a mouthpiece for his text, opening it up and applying it as a word from God to his hearers,... in order that the text may speak... and be heard, making each point from his text in such a manner that [his audience] may discern [the voice of God]." Charles Spurgeon notes,

“A sermon comes with far greater power to the consciences of the hearers when it is plainly the very Word of God- not a lecture about the Scripture, but Scripture itself opened up and inforced... I will further recommend you to hold to the *ipsissima verba*, the very Words of the Holy Ghost... those sermons which expound the exact words of the Holy Spirit are the most useful and most agreeable to the major part of our congregations. They love to have the words themselves explained and expounded.”

Though Spurgeon himself did not always practice what he preached, his words here are certainly on target.

-Lectures to My Students (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 73.

Haddon Robinson adds, “When a preacher fails to preach the Scriptures, he abandons his authority. He confronts his hearers no longer with a word from God but only with another word from men.” (Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*) In the past several decades the issue of authorial intent has come under heavy and sustained assault,

especially with the popularity of the deconstruction movement and its godfather, the deceased Jacques Derrida. For a number of years the English literary critic E. D. Hirsch stood in the gap. Now Kevin Vanhoozer has entered the battle, exposing the underlying [a] theistic/ [a] Gnostic agenda that was driving the deconstructionist all along. In his superb work, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*, he presents a careful and impressive defense for “Resurrecting the Author” (ch. 5) and Redeeming the Text (ch. 6). This is a much needed critique in the greater theological and literary world. It is a sad commentary on how easily evangelicals can be seduced, if not by the academy, then by the culture. That this theological and hermeneutical quicksand is ever a serious consideration for those who man our pulpits and shepherd the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a tragedy with enormous consequences. We should not ignore what a reader or hearer brings to a text or a sermon. However, we should not deify (small “d”) it either.

3. Scripture must be interpreted and understood as it was given to the original audience. The text cannot mean today what it did not mean then.

Fee and Stuart correctly assert, “A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers.” (*How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, 64).

This principle does not neglect the fact that the faithful expositor must build a sturdy bridge between the historical audience and their context, and the audience he addresses here and now. It does mean he will not eisegete the text, reading into it the preconceived notions of his own imagination or interest. Further, he will not injure the inspired text with a fanciful and irresponsible hermeneutic that surpasses the allegorist of the medieval period. As evangelical expositors we must continue to affirm that “the meaning is one, though the applications are many.” We must

honor the text as it was given and as it would have been understood by the original audience. However, and this is crucially important. This principle does not ignore the divine authorship of Scripture, the concept of the interpreting Scripture in light of the whole canon, the flow and nature of redemptive history and its Christological focus, or the intriguing issue of *Sensus Plenior*. As Vanhoozer argues, and I find his argument compelling, “‘the fuller meaning’ of Scripture—the meaning associated with divine authorship—emerges only at the level of the whole canon... the canon as a whole becomes the unified act for which the divine intention serves as the unifying principle. The divine intention supervenes on the intention of the human authors. The Spirit will apply meaning, not change it” (264-65). In other words, implications and significances embedded in the meaning of the text, in light of the whole canon, may certainly come to light. This will provide balance, as well as a healthy affirmation of the principle of progressive revelation. We will address this further in principle #5.

4. Pulpit Proclamation must affirm that the historical-grammatical-theological interpretation will best discover both the truth of the text and the theology of the text.

While some decry that the SBC is in danger of being submerged into Calvinist theology, I am far more convinced the real danger is being swallowed whole by shallow and sloppy theology. If we will teach our people solid biblical theology rooted in biblical exposition, extreme agendas from any direction will be easily recognized and quickly jettisoned.

It is my conviction that biblical theology is prior to systematic theology, but that biblical theology must always proceed to systematic theology. The hesitancy on the part of some biblical scholars to follow through on this latter point is unwise and unacceptable. Allowing the priority of biblical/exegetical theology will result in a more faithful and honest interpretation, but it will also demand more tension in one's theological system.

Kaiser reminds us that, "the discipline of Biblical theology must be a twin of exegesis. Exegetical theology will remain incomplete and virtually barren in its results, as far as the church is concerned, without a proper input of "informing theology" (Kaiser, 139).

Doctrinal/theological preaching is noticeably absent in the modern pulpit.

Theological and biblical illiteracy is the heavy price being paid. As the preacher exegetes both his text and audience, he should be sensitive to the theological truths contained in and supported by the text. He must endeavor to develop a strategy that will allow him to convey these truths in a clear, winsome and relevant manner. A faithful minister of the Word will bombard every text with a series of questions that many preachers of the Holy Scripture never ask, questions that will inspire and equip a congregation to become competent systematic theologians.

1. What does this text say about the Bible (and the doctrine of Revelation)?
2. What does this text say about God (also Creation, angelology)?
3. What does this text say about humanity (and sin, our fallenness)?
4. What does this text say about Jesus Christ (His person and work)?
5. What does this text say about the Holy Spirit?

6. What does this text say about Salvation?
7. What does this text say about the Church?
8. What does this text say about Last Things?

Now, we need to be honest and forthright at this point. It is impossible to preach without preaching some type of theology or doctrine. However, an unhealthy allegiance to a particular tradition of theology may give you a nice, tight, clean theological system, but it will also lead you to squeeze and twist certain texts of Scripture in order to force them into your theological mold or grid. I believe a better way is to let your exegesis drive your theology. Let your theological system be shaped by Scripture and not the reverse. You will most certainly have more tension, more mystery, but you will be more true to the text of Holy Scripture, and you will embrace and cultivate a more healthy and balanced theology.

In this context, I would encourage us to always ask of every text two questions, and to ask them in this order, something seeker and emerging types usually fail to do: 1) What does this text say about God? and 2) What does this text say about fallen humanity?

This two-fold inquiry appropriates the insight of Bryan Chappell and his Fallen Condition Focus (FCF). It also will guide us in having a Theocentric/Christocentric homiletic and theology. It will make sure that the real hero of the Bible is always on display: the Lord Jesus Christ. It will serve as an effective vaccine to the psychological, therapeutic, feel-good or mystical/personalistic diseases that have infected the Church. It will keep Jesus preeminent and the gospel front and center.

Warren Wiersbe has sounded a much needed warning in this area,

“I don’t think the average church member realizes the extent

of the theological erosion that's taken place on the American exegetical scene since World War II, but the changes I've witnessed in Christian broadcasting and publishing make it very real to me. Radio programs that once majored in practical Bible teaching are now given over to man-centered interviews ('talk' radio is a popular thing) and man-centered music that sounds so much like what the world presents, you wonder if your radio is tuned to a Christian station. In so much of today's ministry 'feeling good' has replaced being good, and 'happiness' has replaced holiness."

-(Warren Wiersbe, *Be Myself*, 301.)

Donald Bloesch adds, "...the church that does not take theology seriously is unwittingly encouraging understandings of the faith that are warped or unbalanced."

-(*Crumbling Foundations: Death And Rebirth In An Age Of Upheaval*, 107). A steady diet of exegetical theology fleshed out in expository preaching is a certain cure of the spiritual anemia that afflicts too many of our churches.

5. Effective biblical instruction will take serious and develop the implications of what Jesus said in Luke 24 about the Christological nature of Scripture.

Jesus said in John 15:26, When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father- the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father- He will testify about Me."

And in John 16:14, Jesus adds, "He [the Holy Spirit] will glorify Me." Call it what you will, preaching that does not exalt, magnify and glorify the Lord Jesus is not Christian Preaching. Preaching that does not present the gospel and call men and women to repent of sin and place their faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ is not gospel preaching. We are not Jewish rabbis or scribes, and this truth should guide us in how we handle the Old Testament. Jesus, Himself, provides the hermeneutical key in Luke 24.

Good and faithful exposition will be Christological in focus, inner-canonical in context, and inter-textual in building a biblical theology. It will carefully interpret Scripture in the greater context of the grand redemptive storyline of Scripture. The near and immediate context will be honored, but the extended and canonical context also will be honored and explored as well. Such a hermeneutic and homiletic is in harmony with that which was employed by the apostles. Applying what can be called a comprehensive Christocentric hermeneutic, we will examine “the little narratives” and “pericopes” in light of the “big narrative,” the great redemptive narrative centered in Christ. As this applies to the Old Testament, we will exegete and expound Scripture recognizing that all of the Old Testament points to Christ, and as those in Christ, it points to and is applied to us mediated through Christ.

John Akin guides us when he writes,

“We look for clues, themes, etc. that foreshadow what will happen at the end of the story. After reading the whole story, those clues and themes make greater sense, and are read in light of the rest of the story. When reading stories like *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Odyssey*, or *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, etc. we do not dissect the earlier episodes without putting them in the context of the entire story. It would be like analyzing act two of *Romeo and Juliet* without

seeing the clues and themes that foreshadow the tragic movement of the plot. The same must be done when reading the Old Testament, because there are “clues” and themes that point forward to fulfillment in Christ.”

- (John Akin, “*Reading the Bible Christocentrically: Part 2*, SBC Witness, 11-08-06)

6. From beginning to end, from the study to the pulpit, the entire process of biblical exposition must take place in absolute and complete submission to the Holy Spirit.

J. H. Jowett captured the essence of what we are after when we stand to proclaim the Word of God. There is a sobering and piercing nature to what he says: “What we are after is not that folks shall say at the end of it all. “What an excellent sermon!’ That is a measured failure. You are there to have them say when it is over, “What a great God!’ It is something for men not to have been in your presence but in His.”

-(J. H. Jowett, quoted in *Context*, Dec. 1, 1997, p. 2).

All that we do in preparation and proclamation of the Bible should take place in humble submission to the Holy Spirit. In the study, as we analyze the text, study the grammar, parse the verbs, consult commentaries, and gather the raw materials for the message, we should seek His guidance and confess our total dependence on Him.

When we stand to preach, to minister the Word to our people, again we must plead for His filling and direction. Word and Spirit was a hallmark of the Reformers, and it must be the same with us. Submission to the Spirit is no substitute and no excuse for shirking the hard work of the study. However, a homiletical masterpiece will be of little value without the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

We are not journey guides, self-helpers, positive thinkers, entertainers, comedians, or liberal or conservative commentators, parroting the wisdom of the world, true though it sometimes may be. We are gospel preachers, Jesus-intoxicated heralds by virtue of the indwelling and filling of the Holy Spirit. Submission to the Spirit will lead to exaltation of the Son.

7. Changed Lives for the glory of God is always the goal for which we strive. Therefore it is a sin, of the most serious sort, to preach the Word of God in a boring and unattractive fashion.

I agree with Charles Koller who says, “It is more important clumsily to have something to say than cleverly to say nothing” (Charles Koller, *Expository Preaching Without Notes*, 42-43). However, in Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 Solomon says, “... the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly.”

In the multi-media, entertainment saturated culture in which we live, I repeatedly tell my students, “What you say is more important than how you say it, but how you say it has never been more important.” Haddon Robinson, quoting a Russian proverb says, “it is the same with men as with donkeys; whoever would hold them fast must get a very good grip on their ears.”

I believe that we cannot improve on the 3 canons of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. In the communication event we must weave together in an attractive tapestry *Logos* (what), *Ethos* (who), and *Pathos* (how). Content is essential, credibility is crucial, and delivery is of no small importance. Aristotle reminds us, “it is not enough to know

what to say – one must know how to say it” (*Rhetoric*, 182). Chuck Swindoll warns us, “If you think the gathering of Biblical facts and standing up with a Bible in your hand will automatically equip you to communicate well, you are deeply mistaken, It will not. You must work at being interesting. Boredom is a gross violation, being dull is a grave offence, and irrelevance is a disgrace to the Gospel. Too often these three crimes go unpunished and we preachers are the criminals... preaching is not as simple as dumping a half-ton load of religious whine, and a hodgepodge of verbs, nouns, and adjectives; but preparing the heart, sharpening the mind; delivering the goods with care, sensitivity, timing, and clarity. It’s the difference between slopping hogs and feeding sheep... [Therefore] study hard, pray like mad, think it through, tell the truth, then stand tall. But while you’re on your feet, don’t clothe the riches of Christ in rags. Say it well, “(Eva. Ch. Of Fullerton Newsletter, date unknown.) Martyn Lloyd-Jones adds, “There is no doubt about this; effective speaking involves action; and that is why I stress that the whole person must be involved in preaching.”

An effective communicator will always be genuinely relevant. The wise preacher will exegete both the scriptures and the culture. He understands that he must know each equally well. Both Luther and Calvin understood this. Luther said, “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ” (quoted in *Good News*, Sept/Oct 1998, p. 9).

Calvin adds,

What advantage would there be if we were to stay here half a day and I were to expound half a book without considering you or your profit and edification?... We must take into consideration those persons to whom the teaching is addressed... For this reason let us note well that they who have this charge to teach, when they speak to a people, are to decide which teaching will be good and profitable so that they will be able to disseminate it faithfully and with discretion to the usefulness of everyone individually.”

-(John Calvin, quoted in Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Word*, pgs. 132-133)

Bad preaching will sap the life of a church. It will kill its spirit, dry up its fruit, and eventually empty it. If we would dare to be honest, we must say that bad preaching is not true preaching. It is preaching not worthy of the name.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones understood this well when he said:

“What is preaching? Logic on fire! Eloquent reason! Are these contradictions? Of course they are not... A theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire... I say again that a man who speaks about these things dispassionately has no right whatsoever to be in a pulpit; and should never be allowed to enter one.”

-(Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching*, pg. 97)

Any theology that does not compel you to plead with men to be reconciled with God

is not a theology worth having. Any preaching that does expect the living and powerful Word of God to produce results and usher in conversions is preaching that should be retired to the graveyard where it rightfully belongs. “On one occasion a young student of Spurgeon came to the great preacher complaining that he wasn’t seeing conversions through his preaching. Spurgeon inquired, ‘Surely you don’t expect conversions every time you preach, do you?’ The young man replied, ‘Well, I suppose not.’ Spurgeon then said, ‘That’s precisely why you are not having them.’”

-(Roy J. Fish, *Giving a Good Invitation*, p. 221)

Conclusion

William Willimon, former Dean of the chapel at Duke University, said some years ago, “today’s conservatives sound like yesterday’s liberals.” In a fascinating article entitled “Been there, preached that,” (*Leadership*, Fall 1995), Willimon sounds a prophetic warning to evangelicals that they might not be seduced by the sirens of modernity and follow the tragic path of insignificance which mainline denominations have trod. *“I’m a mainline-liberal-Protestant-Methodist-type Christian. I know we are soft on Scripture. Norman Vincent Peale has exercised a more powerful effect on our Preaching than St. Paul...”*

I know we play fast and loose with Scripture. But I’ve always had this fantasy that somewhere, like in Texas, there were preachers who preached it all, Genesis to Revelation without blinking an eye...

I took great comfort in knowing that, even while I preacher a pitifully compromised, “Pealed” – down gospel, that somewhere, good ole Bible-believing preachers were

offering their congregations the unadulterated Word, straight up. Do you know how disillusioning it has been for me to realize that many of these self-proclaimed biblical preachers now sound more like liberal mainliners than liberal mainliners? At the very time those of us in the mainline, oldline, sidelined were repenting of our pop psychological pap and rediscovering the joy of disciplined biblical preaching, these “biblical preachers” were becoming “user friendly” and “inclusive,” taking their homiletical cues from the “felt needs” of us “boomers” and “busters” rather than the excruciating demands of the Bible.

I know why they do this... it all starts with American Christians wanting to be helpful to the present order, to be relevant (as the present order defines relevance). We so want to be invited to lunch at the White House or at least be interviewed on ‘Good Morning America.’ So we adjust our language to the demands of the market, begin with the world and its current infatuations rather than the Word and its peculiar judgments on our infatuations. If you listen to much of our preaching, you get the impression that Jesus was some sort of itinerant therapist who, for free, traveled about helping people feel better. Ever since Fosdick, we mainline liberals have been bad about this. Start with some human problem like depression; then rummage the Bible for a relevant answer. Last fall, as I was preparing in my office for the Sunday service, the telephone rang. ‘Who’s preaching in Duke Chapel today? Asked a nasal, Yankee-sounding voice. I cleared my throat and answered, ‘Reverend Doctor William Willimon. ‘Who’s that?’ asked the voice. ‘The Dean of the Chapel,’ I answered in a sonorous tone. ‘I hope he won’t be preaching politics. I’ve had a rough week and I need to hear about God. My

Baptist church is so eaten up with politics, I've got to hear a sermon!' When you have to come to a Methodist for a biblical sermon, that's pitiful."

Walt Kaiser would concur with Willimon:

"It is no secret that Christ's Church is not as 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 bodies. Simultaneously, a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church."

-Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], pp. 7-8

Luther, in a different day to be sure, saw the church in a similar condition. However he did not despair, for he saw, as we must see, the antidote that will cure the patient. In his "A Treatise on Christian Liberty" he throws down the gauntlet and gives us final words to guide us and inspire us:

"Let us then consider it certain and conclusively established that the soul can do without all things except the Word of God, and that where this is not there is no help for the soul in anything else whatever. But if it has the Word it is rich and lacks nothing, since this Word is the Word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy,

of liberty, of wisdom, of power, of grace, of glory, and of every blessing beyond our power to estimate.”

-Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Christian Liberty.” *Three Treatises*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947, 23

To Luther’s word we should all voice a hearty, “Amen and amen.”