

Biblically-Anemic Preaching: The Devastating Consequences of a Watered-Down Message

Jeremiah 8:11; 2 Timothy 4:2

A118

Those who are familiar with my ministry know that I am committed to expository preaching. It is my unshakable conviction that the proclamation of God's Word should always be the heart and the focus of the church's ministry (2 Timothy 4:2). And proper biblical preaching should be systematic, expositional, theological, and God-centered.

Such preaching is in short supply these days. There are plenty of gifted communicators in the modern evangelical movement, but today's sermons tend to be short, shallow, topical homilies that massage people's egos and focus on fairly insipid subjects like human relationships, "successful" living, emotional issues, and other practical but worldly—and not definitively biblical—themes. These messages are lightweight and without substance, cheap and synthetic, leaving little more than an ephemeral impression on the minds of the hearers.

Some time ago I hosted a discussion at the Expositors' Institute, an annual small-group colloquium on preaching held at our church. In preparation for that seminar, I took a yellow legal pad and a pen and began listing the negative effects of the superficial brand of preaching that is so rife in modern evangelicalism.

I initially thought I might be able to identify about ten, but in the end I had jotted down a list of sixty-one devastating consequences. I've distilled them to fifteen by combining and eliminating all but the most crucial ones. I offer them as a warning against superficial, marginally biblical preaching—both to those who stand behind the pulpit and to those who sit in the pew.

1. It usurps the authority of God over the soul. Whether a preacher boldly proclaims the Word of God or not is ultimately a question of authority. Who has the right to speak to the church? The preacher or God? Whenever anything is substituted for the preaching of the Word, God's authority is usurped. What a prideful thing to do! In fact, it is hard to conceive of anything more insolent that could be done by a man who is called by God to preach.

2. It removes the lordship of Christ from His church. Who is the Head of the church? Is Christ really the dominant teaching authority in the church? If so, then why are there so many churches where His Word is not being faithfully proclaimed? When we look at contemporary ministry, we see programs and methods that are the fruit of human invention, the offspring of opinion polls and neighborhood surveys, and other pragmatic artifices. Church-growth experts have in essence wrested control of the church's agenda from her true Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Puritan forefathers resisted the imposition of government-imposed liturgies for precisely this reason: They saw it as a direct attack on the headship of Christ over His own church. Modern preachers who neglect the Word of God have yielded the ground those men fought and sometimes died for. When Jesus Christ is exalted among His people, His power is manifest in the church. When the church is commandeered by compromisers who want to appease the culture, the gospel is minimized, true power is lost, artificial

energy must be manufactured, and superficiality takes the place of truth.

3. It hinders the work of the Holy Spirit. What is the instrument the Spirit uses to do His work? The Word of God. He uses the Word as the instrument of regeneration (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18). He also uses it as the means of sanctification (John 17:17). In fact, it is the only tool He uses (Ephesians 6:17). So when preachers neglect God's Word, they undermine the work of the Holy Spirit, producing shallow conversions and spiritually lame Christians—if not utterly spurious ones.

4. It demonstrates appalling pride and a lack of submission. In the modern approach to "ministry," the Word of God is deliberately downplayed, the reproach of Christ is quietly repudiated, the offense of the gospel is carefully eliminated, and "worship" is purposely tailored to fit the preferences of unbelievers. That is nothing but a refusal to submit to the biblical mandate for the church. The effrontery of ministers who pursue such a course is, to me, frightening.

5. It severs the preacher personally from the regular sanctifying grace of Scripture. The greatest personal benefit that I get from preaching is the work that the Spirit of God does on my own soul as I study and prepare for two expository messages each Lord's Day. Week by week the duty of careful exposition keeps my own heart focused and fixed on the Scriptures, and the Word of God nourishes me while I prepare to feed my flock. So I am personally blessed and spiritually strengthened through the enterprise. If for no other reason, I would never abandon biblical preaching. The enemy of our souls is after preachers in particular, and the sanctifying grace of the Word of God is critical to our protection.

6. It clouds the true depth and transcendence of our message and therefore cripples both corporate and personal worship. What passes for preaching in some churches today is literally no more profound than what preachers in our fathers' generation were teaching in the five-minute children's sermon they gave before dismissing the kids. That's no exaggeration. It is often that simplistic, if not utterly inane. There is nothing deep about it. Such an approach makes it impossible for true worship to take place, because worship is a transcendent experience. Worship should take us above the mundane and simplistic. So the only way true worship can occur is if we first come to grips with the depth of spiritual truth. Our people can only rise high in worship in the same proportion to which we have taken them deep into the profound truths of the Word. There is no way they can have lofty thoughts of God unless we have plunged them into the depths of God's self-revelation. But preaching today is neither profound nor transcendent. It doesn't go down, and it doesn't go up. It merely aims to entertain.

By the way, true worship is not something that can be stimulated artificially. A bigger, louder band and more sentimental music might do more to stir people's emotions. But that is not genuine worship. True worship is a response from the heart to God's truth (John 4:23). You can actually worship without music if you have seen the glories and the depth of what the Bible teaches.

7. It prevents the preacher from fully developing the mind of Christ. Pastors are supposed to be under-shepherds of Christ. Too many modern preachers are so bent on understanding the culture that they develop the mind of the culture and not the mind of Christ. They start to think like the world, and not like the Savior. Frankly, the nuances of worldly culture are virtually irrelevant to me. I want to know the mind of Christ and bring that to bear on the culture, no matter what culture I may be ministering to. If I'm going to stand up in a pulpit and be a representative of Jesus Christ, I want to know how He thinks—and that must be my message to His people too. The only way to know and proclaim the mind of Christ is by being faithful to study and preach His Word. What happens to

preachers who obsess about cultural "relevancy" is that they become worldly, not godly.

8. It depreciates by example the spiritual duty and priority of personal Bible study. Is personal Bible study important? Of course. But what example does the preacher set when he neglects the Bible in his own preaching? Why would people think they need to study the Bible if the preacher doesn't do serious study himself in the preparation of his sermons? There is now a movement among some in ministry to trim, as much as possible, all explicit references to the Bible from the sermon—and above all, don't ever ask your people to turn to a specific Bible passage because that kind of thing makes "seekers" uncomfortable. Some churches actively discourage their people from bringing Bibles to church lest the sight of so many Bibles intimidate the "seekers." As if it were dangerous to give your people the impression that the Bible might be important!

9. It prevents the preacher from being the voice of God on every issue of his time. Jeremiah 8:9 says, "The wise men are ashamed, they are dismayed and taken. Behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord; so what wisdom do they have?" When I speak, I want to be God's messenger. I'm not interested in exegeting what some psychologist or business guru or college professor has to say about an issue. My people don't need my opinion; they need to hear what God has to say. If we preach as Scripture commands us, there should be no ambiguity about whose message is coming from the pulpit.

10. It breeds a congregation that is as weak and indifferent to the glory of God as their pastor is. Such preaching fosters people who are consumed with their own well-being. When you tell people that the church's primary ministry is to fix for them whatever is wrong in this life—to meet their needs, to help them cope with their worldly disappointments, and so on—the message you are sending is that their mundane problems are more important than the glory of God and the majesty of Christ. Again, that sabotages true worship.

11. It robs people of their only true source of help. People who sit under superficial preaching become dependent on the cleverness and the creativity of the speaker. When preachers punctuate their sermons with laser lights and smoke, video clips and live drama, the message they send is that there isn't a prayer the people in the pew could ever extract such profound material on their own. Such gimmicks create a kind of dispensing mechanism that people can't use to serve themselves. So they become spiritual couch potatoes who just come in to be entertained, and whatever superficial spiritual content they get from the preacher's weekly performance is all they will get. They have no particular interest in the Bible because the sermons they hear don't cultivate that. They are wowed by the preacher's creativity and manipulated by the music, and that becomes their whole perspective on spirituality.

12. It encourages people to become indifferent to the Word of God and divine authority. Predictably, in a church where the preaching of Scripture is neglected, it becomes impossible to get people to submit to the authority of Scripture. The preacher who always aims at meeting felt needs and strokes the conceit of worldly people has no platform from which to confront the man who wants to divorce his wife without cause. The man will say, "You don't understand what I feel. I came here because you promised to meet my felt needs. And I'm telling you, I don't feel like I want to live with this woman anymore." You can't inject biblical authority into that. You certainly wouldn't have an easy time pursuing church discipline. That is the monster that superficial preaching creates. But if you are going to try to deal with sin and apply any kind of authoritative principle to keep the church pure, you must be preaching the Word.

13. It lies to people about what they really need. In Jeremiah 8:11, God condemns the prophets who treated people's wounds superficially. That verse applies powerfully to the preachers who populate so many prominent evangelical pulpits today. They omit the hard truths about sin and judgment. They tone down the offensive parts of Christ's message. They lie to people about what they really need, promising them "fulfillment" and earthly well-being when what people really need is an exalted vision of Christ and a true understanding of the splendor of God's holiness.

14. It strips the pulpit of power. "The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). Everything else is impotent, giving merely an illusion of power. Human strategy is not more important than Scripture. The showman's ability to lure people in should not impress us more than the Bible's ability to transform lives.

15. It puts the responsibility on the preacher to change people with his cleverness. Preachers who pursue the modern approach to ministry must think they have the power to change people. That, too, is a frightening expression of pride. We preachers can't save people, and we can't sanctify them. We can't change people with our insights, our cleverness, by entertaining them or by appealing to their human whims and wishes and ambitions. There's only One who can change sinners. That's God, and He does it by His Spirit through the Word.

So pastors must preach the Word, even though it is currently out of fashion to do so (2 Timothy 4:2). That is the only way their ministry can ever truly be fruitful. Moreover, it assures that they will be fruitful in ministry, because God's Word never returns to Him void; it always accomplishes that for which He sends it and prospers in what He sends it to do (Isaiah 55:11).

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