

Expository Preaching in a Postmodern World, Part 2

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:8; 1 Timothy 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:15

Code: A153

QUESTION: In a lot of today's literature on preaching, the idea exists that preaching should impact culture and culture should shape the style of preaching. How does that land with you?

I don't think either of those things is true. I don't think preaching is going to impact culture—I think preaching is going to impact people. And indirectly, if the Lord determines to save a mass of people, it's going to have some social impact on the country or the nation or the world. You have the Great Awakening in America having some short-term—and maybe even some long-term—cultural impact, but unbelievers are always going to behave like unbelievers. The culture may be more or less influenced by Christianity, but I don't think the objective should be impacting culture, if by that you mean anything less than conversion.

As far as the culture shaping preaching, I would say it shapes preaching only in the sense that you address the issues. If you want to define what's wrong with a society, you need to know something about the society. In different cultures there are different dominant sins or kinds of behavior or belief systems that need to be addressed. If you are preaching the gospel in a third-world country, for example, the things that dominate their lives would be different than ours. They might not include materialism and the kinds of things that are unique to an affluent Western society. So when you're talking about the sins of the age or the dominant influences in the culture, they vary from place to place, and it is helpful to know what they are. But that doesn't say anything about what style of preaching you use. That only says how you enter into the dialogue with the culture.

Paul says, if I speak to Jews I speak a certain way, and if I speak to Gentiles I speak a certain way. But that's only at the point of entry. That has nothing to say about the style. In other words, people today are used to watching sitcoms on TV, but that doesn't demand that you preach in a narrative style. I would say you ought to avoid that style, because people are so used to it. People are used to plays and theatrics and movies, and so avoid all of that in your preaching, and your message will come in a very unfamiliar package. There will be a starkness to it, and it will be distinct and contrary to what they are used to hearing. That's one reason I prefer the expository and authoritative sermon—it's so contrary to what people are used to that it's riveting and compelling.

QUESTION: Apart from the gifting of God and His unique work through you, what have been the keys to the effectiveness of your preaching ministry over the years?

The first thing is interest. I think it's interesting. I don't know why it's interesting. I've tried to understand and assess that, but I really don't know. People are not going to come Sunday after Sunday, year after year, and listen to me for an hour in the morning and another hour at night if they're not interested in what I'm saying. And that has nothing to do with outlines or illustrations. Outlines serve a purpose and some illustrations capture the moment, but over the long haul in order for people to listen to expository preaching week-in week-out, there has to be a compelling interest to it.

Some of it has to do with the element of surprise. Preachers who are interesting say things that people don't expect them to say. As a preacher, you cannot simply say those things that are obvious to everyone and expect to create interest. There must be an element of surprise. It may not be that you're introducing a surprising doctrine, but you're saying it in a captivating way.

If you're boring in a personal conversation, you're probably going to be boring in a sermon. Some people are just interesting people—and interesting to talk to—because they have interesting insights and an interesting way to express things. Some of that is innate, but you can also become interesting if you can get interesting material. So I think the challenge is to be interesting, and the way to be more interesting than you would normally be is to have interesting information. And that demands that you be an extensive reader.

In addition to being interesting, a preacher must also be profound. And when I talk about profound, I'm not talking about being thick and heavy and obscure—I'm talking about being deep. In other words, there's something underneath the surface, something under the popular radar that's in the text and that you're able to give to the people. You're able to go down into the passage and pull up the treasure that they—no matter how many times they go over it on their own—are not going to get. And it's not just for the sake of interest—it comes with some weight, because it deals with the question, "What is God really saying here?"

On the surface there are certain things that people can see, but by the time I get done with a passage, there is a depth of understanding of what God is communicating in the text that is surprising to them because they couldn't see it. And it's weighty to them, because it brings the force of truth to bear on their lives.

Another thing that makes preaching effective is creating the original setting of the text so it becomes a living event. Whether it's Paul writing to a church or Jesus with the Pharisees, you want to bring your people there, so that they are in the environment, living it and seeing it unfold. And that means you have to do a lot of background and context work—you've got to create the context as a living context.

Rather than trying to take the Bible and bring it into the modern day, I try to take the modern day and bring it back to the Bible. And that's a distinction you want to make. This stuff about culture shaping preaching is taking the Bible and redefining it in modern terms. My goal is to take modern culture and the people of that culture and redefine them in biblical terms so that they are living back in the Scriptures.

Along with living a life of integrity and being prayerful and dependent on the Lord, those are the keys to effective preaching.

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