

Telling the Truth in a Postmodern World: An Apologetic for Strong Expository Preaching

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Philip Graham Ryken introduces his chapter on expository preaching in his excellent book, *City On A Hill* in the following way:

Preaching has fallen out of favor. “Stop preaching at me,” people say in these post-Christian times. “Spare me the sermon.” If we consult the dictionary, we find that the first definition of preach is “to deliver a sermon,” but the second is “to exhort in a . . . tiresome manner.” And when average Americans think of preaching, that is exactly what they have in mind: Christian communication that is almost certainly boring and probably annoying as well.

Preaching is also falling out of favor among Christians, which is yet another sign that our post-Christian culture is producing a post-Christian church. The listener, not God, is sovereign. There is an overall “dumbing down” of doctrine. Sermons are getting shorter; if they go longer than twenty minutes, people start to get restless. Church-goers demand to be entertained, so in some cases the sermon is gradually replaced by music, testimonies, drama, or even video. Where there is a strong commitment to preaching, it often tends to be more experiential than biblical and humanistic than evangelistic. One popular trend is for preachers to tell “a simple story designed to teach a moral lesson, as opposed to a traditional dissection of a biblical text. Often it is a very personal tale of the preacher’s trials and triumphs, with lots of emotional content and little thorny theology.” Ministers who resort to this form of communication have lost their confidence in the power of God’s Word. As a result, their congregations rarely hear the voice of God’s Spirit speaking in Scripture. The post-Christian church no longer believes in the power of biblical preaching, plain and simple.¹

Albert Mohler affirms the centrality of expository preaching when he says that “music is not the central act of Christian worship, nor is evangelism, nor even the ordinances. The heart of Christian worship is the authentic preaching of the Word of God.”² Like Ryken, Mohler recognizes that expository preaching is out of favor even among Christians, yet he insists that nothing else will do:

In preaching the biblical text, the preacher explains how the Bible directs our thinking and living. This brings the task of expository preaching into direct confrontation with the postmodern worldview and the simple fact of human sinfulness. We do not want to be told how to think or how to live. Each of us desires to be the author of our own life script, the master of our own fate, our own judge and lawgiver and guide.

But the word of God lays a unique and privileged claim upon the church as the body of Christ. Every text demands a fundamental realignment of our basic worldview and way

¹ Ryken, Philip Graham, *City On A Hill* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 35, 36.

² Ryken, Philip Graham, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan III, *Give Praise To God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 109.

of life. Thus, the church is always mounting a counterrevolution to the spirit of the age, and preaching is the God-ordained means whereby the saints are armed and equipped for this battle and confrontation.³

James Boice, in the last book he wrote before his death, reflects a similar angst regarding contemporary attitudes inside the evangelical church toward the word of God. While evangelicals generally affirm the Bible as *inerrant*, their ministry motif seems to deny that it is *sufficient* to touch and transform our 21st century world:

Most evangelicals will affirm inerrancy. But many evangelicals have abandoned the Bible all the same simply because they do not think it is adequate for the challenges we face today. They do not think it is sufficient for winning people to Christ in this age, so they turn to felt-need sermons or entertainment or “signs and wonders” instead. They do not think the Bible is sufficient for achieving Christian growth, so they turn to therapy groups or Christian counseling. They do not think it is sufficient for making God’s will known, so they look for external signs or revelations. They do not think it is adequate for changing our society, so they establish evangelical lobby groups in Washington and work to elect “Christian” congressmen, senators, presidents, and other officials. They seek change by power politics and money.⁴

If it is true *that* “the voice of God’s Spirit” is to be found in the proclamation of God’s Word, *that* expository preaching is a “direct confrontation with the postmodern world” and “a counterrevolution to the spirit of the age,” *and that* Scripture is not only inerrant in its essence but sufficient in its effect, then what do we need to know about the exposition of truth in our own pastoral ministries as we face the 21st century world? In the simplest sense, I will try to answer this question by defining *three critical areas* of thought that we must give attention to.

The World We Are Inheriting

There are many ways of looking at the 21st century world.⁵ Perhaps the most accurate analysis of contemporary society is to say that we are living in post-Christian times. Because this is so we are facing a new kind of barbarism which is characterized by two significant features: *relativism* and *narcissism*:

Relativism is radical skepticism: the denial of absolute truth. The relativist says, “The truth is whatever you want it to be.”

Narcissism is radical individualism: the demand for absolute individual autonomy or infatuation with and worship of the self. The narcissist asks, “What’s in it for me?”

Taken together the relativistic mind and the narcissistic heart explain a good deal about what is wrong with America today. The sad reality is, however, that this very same mindset and heart-focus have been baptized into the church; they are inside the body of Christ. Ryken points out

³ Ibid., 114.

⁴ Boice, James Montgomery, *Whatever Happened To The Gospel of Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 24.

⁵ In this section I am summarizing some of the ideas set forth by Ryken in the first two chapters of *City On A Hill*.

that even non-Christians have started to notice. *The New Yorker*, of all places, complained: “The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out on public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into a marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our church culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection.” Of course then the question becomes, Why even bother to go to a church?

Clearly, relativism and narcissism carry implications for preaching. In a post-Christian culture the last thing people want to hear about is the *truth* about their *self-centeredness*. Paul anticipated such a time in his own day when he wrote these words to Timothy: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Timothy 4:3 & 4). The 21st century is one of the times when people will have zero tolerance for truth but a powerful preference for myths.

And this assault on truth and preference for myths is finding its way into the body of Christ in a segment of the body that Ryken calls “The New Evangelicalism.” The winds of doctrinal change are already sweeping through the evangelical church, pushing some colleges and seminaries in a direction that has been designated “post-conservative” evangelicalism. The following doctrines are under attack:

- 1) *The Doctrine of Scripture* – The scriptural doctrine of biblical inerrancy and sufficiency is becoming optional rather than foundational.
- 2) *The Doctrine of God* – The biblical doctrine of God’s sovereignty and omniscience is under assault by advocates of “open theism.”
- 3) *The Doctrine of Christ* – Some evangelical scholars are denying that explicit personal faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation.
- 4) *The Doctrine of Sin* – The “gospel” of self-esteem is replacing the biblical doctrine of humanity as created in God’s image, fallen into depravity and spiritually dead apart from regeneration.
- 5) *The Doctrine of Justification* – Out of an eagerness to find common cause with Catholicism, many post-conservative evangelicals are dismissing the necessity of the biblical principle of *sola fide*, the gospel of justification by faith alone.⁶

Clearly, these new theological trends are not peripheral issues. They strike at the very heart of Christian theology. They concern such fundamental doctrines as the sufficiency of Scripture, the sovereignty of God, the depravity of sin, the exclusivity of Christ and the necessity of justification as biblically defined.

⁶ Ryken, *City On A Hill*, 38-42.

How should we respond to these challenges? In a time of widespread biblical ignorance and doctrinal confusion, the only way for the body of Christ to maintain its doctrinal equilibrium and its theological integrity is to “Preach the Word” (2 Timothy 4:2).

The Word We Are Proclaiming

Our task as pastors, in the midst of a relativistic and narcissistic secular world and a concessive and accommodating evangelical world, is to preach God’s Word.

What kind of Word is this? In his second letter to Timothy, Paul identifies several of its most powerful characteristics (2 Timothy 3:15-17):

- 1) *It is Sacred in its Character* – because it is called “the holy Scriptures” (v. 15). This identical phrase is employed by Josephus and Philo and also by Hellenistic Jews when referring to the Old Testament Scripture.⁷ It means that the Bible is composed of direct revelation from God, and on that basis it must be conceived of as sacred in its character.
- 2) *It is Salvific in its Goal* – because it is “able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (v. 15). Paul’s world “able” means “powerful.” Scripture is extraordinarily efficacious in producing salvation. The Roman world of Paul’s day was acquainted with power – external and military power. But internally and morally Rome was powerless. In particular, the city of Rome had become a “cesspool of iniquity,” Seneca had said; and “a filthy sewer into which the dregs of the empire flood,” Juvenal could say. Paul was taking to the Roman Empire the one message on earth which is sufficient to radically change people from the inside out for time and eternity: “the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation.”
- 3) *It is Sterling in its Origin* – because “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (v. 16). Here we are celebrating the trustworthiness of Scripture in all of its parts and each of its words. It is a breathed-out, written-down document from God Himself. This text, combined with 2 Peter 1:21, teaches that the omniscient Holy Spirit supernaturally superintended both the reception and the recording of the divine revelation by the human authors. This miraculous synergism of divine control and human cooperation is a process that defies logical explanation and empirical analysis. It must be accepted by faith. It did not demean the human authors into machines, as though they were dictaphones, and yet it preserved from error the text of Scripture as originally given by God.⁸
- 4) *It is Sanctifying in its Impact* – because “it is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (v. 16). Together these terms describe Christian growth in the critical areas of erecting truth (doctrine); refuting error (reproof); defeating fallenness (correction); and embracing righteousness (instruction). If we long for progressive sanctification to take root in our lives in each of these areas, there is only one place to turn for such provisions: God’s Word, which alone is “profitable” for such

⁷ Rogers Jr., Cleon L. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 505.

⁸ See my “Preface” in, *One Bible Only?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 9-12.

things! And the *objective* toward which all of this is moving is the thorough equipping of the people of God for ministry (v. 17). The thoughtful integration of Scripture into our hearts and lives will set us and our people aflame to help others and honor God. It becomes the ground of redemptive ministry.

In my mind it is impossible to exaggerate the impeccable virtues or the incredible value of the Scriptures. And all of this together constitutes a powerful reason to “Preach the Word.”

The Work We Are Encouraging

Philip Graham Ryken argues that faithful preaching must include gospel presentation, theological explanation, and practical application – our preaching should always be evangelical, doctrinal and practical! The best kind of preaching to accomplish these noble goals is *expository preaching*. In the simplest sense, expository preaching means making God’s Word plain. In an expository message the preacher simply tries to explain what the Bible teaches. The main points of his sermon are the points made by the text itself.⁹ Thus the locus of authority rests in the message of Scripture itself not in the messenger.

Stephen Olford defines expository preaching as:

The spirit-empowered explanation and proclamation of the text of God’s Word, with due regard to the historical, contextual, grammatical and doctrinal significance of the given passage, with the specific object of invoking a Christ-transforming response.

Two other definitions of expository preaching have been especially helpful to me in my pastoral journey:

- Expository preaching is: Exposing the *meaning* of a text in its context and defining the *significance* of that meaning to the contemporary world in language it can understand.
- Expository preaching is: Opening up the mind of God out of the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God through the personality of the man of God to the hearts, minds and wills of the people of God.

John Stott in his excellent book, *Between Two Worlds* (pp. 209-212), suggests that two convictions about the Biblical text stand out here:

- 1) *The Biblical Text is an Inspired Text* – It is unique in its origin nature and authority. Both “revelation” – the unveiling of otherwise unknowable truth; and “inspiration” – the Holy Spirit’s sovereign superintendence of the revelational process – insure the uniqueness of the Biblical text. Without an inspired revelation of the mind of God we would not be Christians at all but Athenians still worshipping “the unknown God” (Acts 17:23). With such a revelatory document we are given the breathtaking privilege of speaking God’s eternal truth into the teeth of our secular culture.

⁹ Ryken, *City On A Hill*, 48.

- 2) *The Biblical Text is Also a Partially Closed Text* – Of course, we believe in the “perspicuity” of Scripture (it has a transparent, “see-through” quality), but it needs a qualification. Scripture is clear in its central message (the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ crucified and risen again), but it is often difficult in some of its particulars. Peter himself affirmed this when he said that some things in Paul’s letters are “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). Consequently, the church needs “pastor-teachers” (teaching shepherds) to expound or “open up” the Scriptures. And it is the ascended Christ who still gives such men as gifts to His church (Ephesians 4:11).

In order to perform our tasks as pastor-teachers who are expository preachers, we will need to develop the skill of what Stott has called a “*double-listening*” in his book, *The Contemporary Christian* (pp. 215, 216). This means that we must listen to both the ancient Word and the modern world. But, of course, we must listen to them with differing degrees of respect. To the ancient Word we listen humbly and obediently. To the modern world we listen critically and redemptively. In this “double-listening” we are striving for a “*double-objective*”: fidelity to Scripture and sensitivity to culture. And without this “double-listening” we fall prey to a “*double-failing*”: either unfaithfulness to Scripture or irrelevance to society. As expository preachers our task is to connect the absolutes of the eternal Word to the desperate lostness of the contemporary relativistic, narcissistic world. This is some of what Stott means when he says that we as expositors stand “Between Two Worlds.” I agree with Os Guinness when he says: “If you want to say things that are relevant, say things that are eternal.” And the only people that can do that are people who “Preach the Word.”