

# 10 Things You Should Know about the Demise of Expository Preaching

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Biblical preaching has fallen on hard times in the western world. There's certainly no lack of speaking and sharing and shouting. And dramatic presentations and video clips are prevalent in pulpits across America. But there is precious little biblical preaching. The Bible makes a token appearance here and there, but rarely to be explained and expounded and acknowledged as authoritative for how we think and live. There are several reasons for this dearth of biblical preaching, ten of which I'll mention.

(1) For one thing, pastors have stopped preaching because they have stopped studying. In effect, they have stopped talking because they have little to say. If they do have a lot to say, it's typically their own ideas and idiosyncrasies unrelated to the inspired text.

(2) This next statement may sound harsh, but so be it: If you are not called to study, you are not called to preach. I'm not suggesting you need a seminary education or a Ph.D. (although both would be wonderful, if God so leads you). But I am saying that a prerequisite for consistent, effective biblical preaching is devotion on a daily basis to in-depth study of the Scriptures. The 19th century Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon once said, "If we are not instructed, how can we instruct? If we have not thought, how shall we lead others to think?"

(3) The lack of study may be traced to several causes. The first culprit is simple laziness or sloth. Again, it was Spurgeon who said: "If by excessive labor, we die before reaching the average age of man, worn out in the Master's service, then glory be to God, we shall have so much less of earth and so much more of Heaven!"

And again, "It is our duty and our privilege to exhaust our lives for Jesus. We are not to be living specimens of men in fine preservation, but living sacrifices, whose lot is to be consumed." Make no mistake: the kind of study that makes for effective exposition is hard work. It requires countless hours, week in and week out, prayerfully and passionately reading and analyzing and evaluating the text, together with careful construction of messages that both accurately reflect what the text meant then and what it means now. There simply are no shortcuts to what God regards as successful pulpit ministry.

(4) Another reason for the lack of study among pastors and thus the dearth of biblical preaching is a pervasive anti-intellectualism that has taken root in our churches. There is a revolt against the importance of the mind in the Christian life, especially among charismatic Christians. Many are paralyzed by the unwarranted fear that too much of the Word of God will eventually quench the Spirit of God. Pause for a moment and reflect on the absurdity of such a thought! We must remember that the mind isn't our enemy, the flesh is. Our flesh is to be mortified but the mind must be renewed ([Romans 12:1ff.](#)). Again, the problem isn't the intellect, but pride. Thinking

isn't a threat. Arrogance is. It isn't the Word of God that threatens the vibrancy of life in the Spirit but ambitious, self-serving sinners.

(5) Another reason for the demise of preaching is that many pastors have lost confidence in the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. If the Bible is not truly the word of God written, if it is not infallible and therefore trustworthy in what it says, no wonder that so few preach its texts. If the Bible is fundamentally no different from any other book, better to preach from what will arouse and entertain your audience. If you regard the biblical text as merely "inspiring" (as are also Shakespeare and Austen, etc.), but not "inspired", your commitment to it will progressively wane and wither.

Preaching will not long survive if one does not embrace the truth of [2 Timothy 3:16-17](#) – "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." Scripture, notes Geoffrey Thomas, "is the breath of God; every sentence and every phrase is the sigh of Jehovah. . . . It is not their perfect reliability that gives the Scriptures their unique authority. It is not even their complete truthfulness. The Bible is powerful because it is the Word of God; what it says God says" ("Powerful Preaching," in *The Preacher and Preaching*, 371). Bryan Chapell concurs:

"Without the authority of the Word preaching becomes an endless search for topics, therapies, and techniques that will win approval, promote acceptance, advance a cause, or soothe worry. Human reason, social agendas, popular consensus, and personal moral convictions become the resources of preaching that lacks 'the historic conviction that what Scripture says, God says'" (*Christ-Centered Preaching*, 23).

(6) A symptom of this loss of confidence in the authority of Scripture is the predominance in today's pulpits of the topical sermon. In one sense, of course, all sermons are "topical" in that they are about something specific. But there is a difference between a topical address or speech and a textual sermon. A discourse is not a sermon unless it is textual, i.e., rooted in a phrase, a passage, a paragraph of the Bible.

Many preachers, notes J. I. Packer, "simply do not trust their Bible enough to let it speak its own message through their lips. . . . [The result is that] in a topical sermon the text is reduced to a peg on which the speaker hangs his line of thought [or a diving board from which he plunges into the pool of his own ideas]; the shape and thrust of the message reflect his own best notions of what is good for people rather than being determined by the text itself" ("Why Preach?" in *Preaching and Preachers*, 4).

(7) Another reason for the demise of preaching again comes from Packer. "Low expectations," he writes, "are self-fulfilling" (4). Many people today have never been taught to expect anything powerful from the exposition of Scripture, and so, not surprisingly, they receive little. "Today's congregations and today's preachers seem to be mostly at one in neither asking nor expecting that God will come to meet His people in the preaching, and so it is no wonder that this does not often happen" (4-5).

(8) Another factor is that rituals often push preaching into obscurity (or reduce the time available to devote to exposition of the word). This isn't necessary. I have been greatly enriched by the beauty and stability of liturgical worship. Ceremony and sacrament shouldn't, but on occasion do, tend to marginalize preaching.

The contemporary emphasis on congregational participation in virtually every phase of corporate worship (not a bad thing, by the way!) has led some to find preaching boring. Of the five senses, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, and hearing, the latter has been minimized while the other four have been accentuated. People in church today want to see pageantry, smell incense and flowers, taste the sacraments, and touch whatever can be touched. But hearing the Word of God has largely lost its appeal.

By the way, I'm not at all suggesting that worship should be exclusively oral in nature. I enjoy and encourage the restoration of the aesthetic dimension into our churches. If there is anything we Protestants can learn from our friends in the Orthodox and Catholic Church it is the importance of holistic devotion to God, a worship that engages the entire man, body and soul and spirit. But we must guard against letting this renewal of the aesthetic diminish our confidence in the life-changing, Christ-exalting power of the preached Word. Besides, there is a unique and often incomparable "beauty" in the preached word that no sight, sound, smell, or flavor can rival.

(9) Related to the previous point, preaching is on the wane because the power of the spoken word to communicate significant and life-changing truth has become suspect. We live in an action-oriented, visual, culture where mere "words" are trivialized and "sermons" are viewed as archaic. Many applaud these changes, seeing in them a much needed shift from the logo-centricity (or word-centeredness) of traditional evangelicalism to what they perceive as a more holistic approach to Christian ministry.

(10) Preaching has also fallen on hard times because, in fulfillment of Paul's prophetic warning, the time has come "when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths" ([2 Tim. 4:3-4](#)). People don't want biblical preaching and, sadly, few are willing to buck the tide of popular sentiment. Paul identifies the problem. People will develop a distaste for "sound doctrine," insisting that it is either irrelevant ("who cares what you believe, just as long as you live right") or disruptive ("I don't like being told to repent of sins or hearing about hell, etc."), or divisive ("people will take sides on controversial issues and split our church!"). People will prefer entertainment to exposition ("wanting to have their ears tickled"). Hankering after the new, the odd, the unusual, the sensational, will replace the desire for the solid meat of the Word. They will look to their own "desires" rather than the desires of God to determine what they will hear. One of the greatest temptations preachers face today is scratching the "itch" of so-called "felt-needs" among their congregation. There is often a significant difference between "felt-needs" and "biblical-needs". What people often want is not always what they need. In a subsequent article we'll turn our attention to the positive benefits of expository preaching in particular.