



Preaching
for God's
Glory
Alistair Begg

Preaching for God's Glory

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The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals exists to call the church, amidst our dying culture, to repent of its worldliness, to recover and confess the truth of God's Word as did the Reformers, and to see that truth embodied in doctrine, worship, and life.

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THE ECLIPSE OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING

I have a vivid recollection as a small boy of sitting in St. George's Tron Church in Glasgow waiting for the commencement of morning worship. At about three minutes to 11 the beadle (parish official) would climb the pulpit stairs and place a large Bible on the lectern. Having opened it to the appropriate passage, he would descend, and the minister would in turn ascend the stairs and sit in the cone-shaped pulpit. The beadle would complete his responsibilities by climbing the stairs a second time to close the pulpit door and leave the pastor to his task. There was no doubt in my young mind that each part of that procedure was marked with significance. There was clearly no reason for the pastor to be in the pulpit apart from the Bible upon which he looked

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down as he read. I understood that, in contrast to his physical posture, the preacher was standing under Scripture, not over it. Similarly, we were listening not so much for *his* message but for *its* message. We were discovering, as J. I. Packer has suggested, that preaching is “letting texts talk.” The right preaching of the Word of God is powerful!

Although D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones voiced his concerns about a certain literary style of Scottish preaching, he would not have disputed the following observation by James W. Alexander: “Among the Scottish Presbyterians every man and every woman, nay, almost every child, carried his pocket-Bible to church, and not only looked out the text, but verified each citation; and as the preaching was in great part of the expository kind, the necessary consequence was, that the whole population became intimately acquainted with the structure of every book in the Bible, and were able to recall every passage with its appropriate accompanying truths” (*Thoughts on Preaching* [Edinburgh and Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, reprint 1975], p. 240).

Long ago the godly Richard Baxter reminded his fellow pastors of the central place of preaching in the fulfillment of their duties:

We must be serious, earnest, and zealous in every part of our work. Our work requireth greater skill, and especially greater life and zeal, than any of us bring to it. It is no

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small matter to stand up in the face of the congregation, and to deliver a message of salvation or damnation, as from the living God, in the name of the Redeemer. It is no easy matter to speak so plain, that the most ignorant may understand us; and so seriously that the deadeast heart may feel us; and so convincingly, that the contradicting cavillers may be silenced. (*The Reformed Pastor* [Edinburgh and Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, reprint 1974], p. 117)

IN THE SHADOWS

Unfortunately, Baxter's challenge seems to be beyond the skill and will of most contemporary preachers with the result that true expository preaching has fallen on hard times. About fifty years ago W. E. Sangster, a great Methodist preacher in Britain, began a volume on preaching with the words, "Preaching is in the shadows. The world does not believe in it" (*The Craft of the Sermon* [Harrisburg, Pa.: Epworth Press, 1954], p. 1). Today, at the beginning of a new millennium, the situation is graver still. Preaching is still in the shadows, but this time *much of the church does not believe in it*.

Much of what now emanates from contemporary pulpits would not have been recognized by either Alexander or Baxter or Sangster as being anywhere close to the kind of expository preaching that is Bible-based, Christ-focused, and life-changing—the kind of preaching that is marked by doctrinal clarity, a sense of gravity, and convincing argument.

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We have instead become far too familiar with preaching that pays scant attention to the Bible, is self-focused, and consequently is capable of only the most superficial impact upon the lives of listeners. Worse still, large sections of the church are oblivious to the fact that they are being administered a placebo rather than the medicine they need. They are satisfied with the feeling that it has done them some good, a feeling that disguises the seriousness of the situation. In the absence of bread the population grows accustomed to cake! Pulpits are for preachers. We build stages for performers.

Some years ago I enjoyed the privilege of speaking at a convention in Hong Kong. The meetings were held in an Anglican church that had a pulpit we did not use. The organizers felt it would be best if we were not six feet above the congregation but on the same level as the people. So they provided a lectern to hold the preacher's Bible as he spoke. I was sharing the event with a kindly older man whom I had never met prior to the convention. We both spoke each morning. Some mornings I would preach first, sometimes he would. Whenever he began a message, his first action was to pick up the small lectern and move it off to the side where it could neither impede his movement nor create the impression that he was "preaching" to the people. Instead, he said, he was delivering a talk, and he wanted to be sure the listeners could relax and benefit from his conversational

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style. When it came time for me to preach, my first action was to put the lectern back in its place, central to the occasion. The congregation laughed as this pattern repeated itself over the course of five days. I would use it; my colleague would remove it.

Before the week was out, two incidents occurred that may or may not have been related. First, I explained to the congregation that the reason I replaced the lectern each time was not simply so I might have a place for my Bible, but because I did not want to forgo the symbolism of having a central pulpit with the Word in its deserved primary place. After all, I observed, if the preacher were to fall down or disappear, the congregation would still be left with its focus in the right place—namely, the Scriptures. I know that my preaching partner did not take this as a personal rebuke, which is what made the second incident all the more telling.

A day or two later he confided to me that he felt he had lost any real sense of passion or power in the delivery of his messages. It was very humbling for me as a young man to sit and listen as he poured out his heart and with tears reflected upon his diminished zeal. It is far too simplistic to suggest that his removal of the podium each time he spoke was a symbol of a faltering conviction regarding the priority and power of Scripture. But at the same time I have a suspicion

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that its removal was more than simply a matter of style or personal preference.

The layout of many contemporary church buildings, including my own, at least flirts with the danger of creating the impression that we have come to hear from man rather than to meet with God. It is imperative that we acknowledge and remember, and help each other acknowledge and remember, that we gather together as the church not to enjoy preaching eloquence (or to criticize its lack) but to hear and heed the Word of God. We come to be exhorted, not entertained.

CARICATURES OF TRUE PREACHING

If churches or their pastors begin to think of the place from which messages are delivered to the congregation as a stage, it is inevitable that caricatures of the preacher will emerge to take the true preacher's place. Sadly, this is precisely what has happened. In our day the expositor of Scripture has been eclipsed by a variety of sad substitutions. We will consider a few.

1. *The cheerleader.* This well-meaning fellow has a peculiar need to be liked and accepted. Whatever the context of a particular message, he is going to be positively inspirational. A good Sunday for him is one where his people laugh a lot, are affirmed and affirming, and go away more self-assured

than when they arrived. Whether they were confronted by the truth of God's Word or humbled by God's presence is largely lost sight of in a quest for wholeness that replaces a concern about holiness. Such an individual often leaves the teaching of the Bible to small groups or home studies. The preacher's task, he feels, is to "pump them up" and prepare them for the daunting week that awaits them as soon as they leave the building.

Sadly, in such a case the sheep leave stirred but without being strengthened, and when the sugar fix provided by the milk-shake sermon has worn off, those with any kind of spiritual appetite wander off in search of more substantial food for their souls. The proper work of the preacher is thus not done.

2. *The conjurer.* When we hear the congregation declaring, "Wasn't it amazing what he got out of that?" we should not immediately assume that the news is good. When the preacher refuses to do the hard work of discovering the actual meaning of the text in its context, and when he divorces discovery and application, just about anything can be conveyed—and often is!

R. W. Dale referred to this in his lectures on preaching given to the faculty and students of Yale in 1876:

I always think of the tricks of those ingenious gentlemen who entertain the public by rubbing a sovereign between

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their hands till it becomes a canary, and drawing out of their coat sleeves half a dozen brilliant glass globes filled with water, and with four or five goldfish swimming in each of them. For myself, I like to listen to a good preacher, and I have no objection in the world to be amused by the tricks of a clever conjurer; but I prefer to keep the conjuring and the preaching separate: conjuring on Sunday morning, conjuring in church, conjuring with texts of Scripture, is not quite to my taste. (*Nine Lectures on Preaching*, the 1876 Yale Lectures [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1877], p. 127)

3. *The storyteller*. This man has convinced himself that since everyone loves a good story and since people tend to be less inclined to follow the exposition of the Bible, he will develop his gift of storytelling to the neglect of the hard work of biblical exposition. Yes, stories were part of the teaching of Jesus. But the fact that his parables were, as we learned in Sunday school, “earthly stories with heavenly meaning” does not grant the contemporary preacher the license to tell stories devoid of heavenly meaning that are of no earthly use!

4. *The entertainer*. Too often these days one is invited to preach with no thought given to the preacher being part of the worshiping throng. Instead he is invited to relax “back-stage” until it is time for him to “do his thing.” I do not want to impugn the motives of those who function in this fashion, but I do question the rightness of such a procedure. It tends

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to foster an environment in which the people come to sit back, relax, and assess the performance rather than to have the heart-attitude of the hymn writer:

*Master, speak, thy servant heareth,
Waiting for thy gracious word.
Speak to me by name, O Master,
Let me know it is to me.*

There is a marked difference in perspective between the joyful solemnity I recall in the vestry at Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh, in the final moments before it was time to mount the pulpit steps and the “go get ’em” camaraderie in many churches today, the latter being more like a locker room sixty seconds before the kickoff.

5. *The systematizer*. I am referring here to the preacher who views the text of Scripture merely as the backdrop for a doctrinal lecture. This is different from the individual who in the course of exegeting the passage draws out the elements of Christian doctrine. The systematizer’s theological framework is so pronounced that it predominates the exposition.

Roy Clements refers to this as the propositional paraphrase sermon, which he says is very likely to lack emotional engagement with the text. “There will be little sensitivity to literary genre. Apocalyptic, poetry, narrative, parable, all are flattened to the prosaic level of a theology

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text-book. No attempt is made to do justice to the lyrical, dramatic, ironic aspects of the text" ("Expository Preaching in a Postmodern World," *The Cambridge Papers*, September 1998). Understandably, when we hear this kind of preaching, we do not doubt its truthfulness, but we do wonder at the absence of passion. While we recognize that one's theological framework affects our view of the Bible, we need to work hard to ensure that the Scripture rules our framework, not the other way around.

6. *The psychologist*. This is what we might refer to as airline preaching. In one airline's magazine there is a regular feature provided by a psychologist. I usually read it, and it is almost always to my benefit. I have learned useful tips about bringing up my teenage children and dealing with impatience, and I have been reminded to purchase flowers for my wife. But that's as far as it goes, or should go. Unfortunately, the pulpits of growing numbers of churches are being filled with pseudo-psychologists who have decided to become purveyors of "helpful insights," most of which can be (and often are) delivered without reference to the Bible. It is a kind of "fill in the blank" approach that provides the seven principles for effective fathering or the top ten challenges facing couples today. It is not uncommon to meet individuals who are being malnourished on this kind of diet and to hear them

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crying rightly, as the people did in Nehemiah's day, "Bring out the Book" (Neh. 8:1).

7. *The naked preacher.* In our "bare all" culture it has become increasingly in vogue for preachers to use the pulpit as a place for sharing their faults and foibles and to make an attempt at "authenticity." By this means they let the people know how "real" they are, as if the people needed help to make such a discovery! If we have been among our people for any length of time, they will have had plenty of occasions to recognize that both we and they are redeemed sinners. The sermon is usually not the best place for such sharing. We have our hands full proclaiming the Gospel, pointing to Christ, telling *the* story. It is not advisable to use the time to point to ourselves and share *our* story.

This list is selective and not exhaustive. We will not comment here about "the politician" or "the end-times guru" or "the hobby-horse rider." However, I cannot resist sharing G. Campbell Morgan's story about the Baptist preacher who had a fixation with baptism and referred to it constantly. One morning he announced his text—"Adam, where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). He continued, "There are three lines we shall follow. First, where Adam was. Second, how he was to be saved from where he was. Third and last, a few words about baptism."

Seasoned pastor Alistair Begg observes that much of what is said from today's pulpits cannot be counted as Bible-based, God-glorifying, and life-changing. Rather than preparing a steady diet of spiritual meat, pastors are mistakenly serving up a self-focused snack—ultimately leaving congregations malnourished and ill prepared to stand firm when their faith is challenged.

Recognizing the need for a return to biblical preaching, Begg has written this practical book, outlining the nature of power-filled, expository preaching and demonstrating its importance in the life of the church.

ALISTAIR BEGG served two churches in his native Scotland before answering the call in 1983 to become senior pastor at Parkside Church in Cleveland, Ohio. A graduate of the London School of Theology, he has written several books and is heard daily on the national radio program *Truth for Life*. He and his wife, Susan, were married in 1975 and have three grown children.

PREACHING