

“Great Message! Pastor”

Sermons have largely become a recital of evangelical platitudes, privately prepared, without interaction with the thinking and praying community. They are publicly performed without lasting impact, usually in a style that does not flow from or serve the text. And these days it seems that most Christians are listening to sermons designed for someone else—the seeker or the young Christian. The preacher is complimented for execution, not for disciple-making. Thousands gather every Sunday to hear what they have heard many times before. There is a large and appreciative market of religious consumers who want to be given a recital of familiar truths. The impact of this kind of preaching is bigger auditoriums, filled with strangers who rarely fellowship beyond their familiar cliques. Consequently, it is becoming more difficult to distinguish between that which is done for spiritual growth and that which is done for public relations.

A preacher in a upper middle class church preached on Paul’s prayer for the Philippians: “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (Phil 1:9-10). His main emphasis was the advantage of acquiring a broad knowledge of life. “Ignorance is not bliss,” he offered. “Whoever said, ‘Ignorance is bliss,’ got it wrong.” He grew emphatic, “Tell me the advantages of not knowing math and science. Tell me the advantages of not knowing opera. There are none,” he declared. “There are no advantages to not knowing.” The preacher’s stress on knowledge fit with his well-educated church.

So far so good, but it was what the preacher left out that was more telling than what he said. He carefully avoided any specific knowledge or insight that might contradict the wisdom of the world. He remained on a generic and abstract level of knowledge that caused no tension with the prevailing intellectual culture. Without exception, everyone, whether they believed in the Bible or not, could agree that we ought to expand our minds and embrace common sense. Yet the apostle Paul’s concern was that this depth of insight and discernment help believers become “pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” The preacher said nothing about the moral, ethical, and spiritual difference between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of Christ. His intentional avoidance of any offense was provocative, especially for knowledgeable Christians who struggle with the conflict between the way of the world and obedience to God. The preacher’s omission raised the issue of integrity.

An African-American preacher preached on Genesis 18, the appearance of the Lord to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre. He entitled his sermon, “Angels in the Neighborhood,” and focused his theme on Abraham’s response to the three visitors. The ancient patriarch “bowed low to the ground.” The preacher used numerous illustrations

drawn from the martial arts and the customs of other cultures to show how bowing shows respect. He led the congregation in practice bows and used the passage to teach about humility and dignity. His big idea was that we should always show respect because we never know when angels may be in the neighborhood. Missing entirely from the sermon was the meaning of why Yahweh met with Abraham and the importance of this encounter in salvation history. The preacher was animated and entertaining and the congregation loved it, but could we say that the gospel was preached that morning?

Whenever Jesus opened his mouth he seemed to be offending someone, but thousands listen to preaching today that causes no offense. Jesus defended his ministry to John the Baptist, saying, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (Mt 11:6). He offended his family, his hometown (Mt 13:57), the Pharisees (Mt 15:12), and the disciples. However, he went out of his way *not* to offend tax collectors (Mt 17:27). When Peter was offended over his Master’s insistence on the cross, Jesus was offended by him (Mt 16:23). Jesus was never rude or negative. The offense arose because he tackled the tension between truth and disobedience—between truth and unbelief. His message was never in the abstract. He never engaged the scribal debate as if he were pressing for conceptual agreement on a propositional point. His preaching was always about transformation. He called men and women to leave their self-directed, self-righteous lives and take up their cross and follow him.

Every fall preachers preach on stewardship. In some churches the sermon series on giving is more important than preaching through Advent or Lent. My impression, having recently listened to a number of pastors on the subject of giving, was that the only offense of the gospel most pastors worry about is the one found in the stewardship sermon. Every pastor I heard began with either an apology for preaching on the subject or an explanation for why he wasn’t giving an apology. It was difficult to resist the conclusion that *religiously* understood, “Stewardship” is when a greedy church makes greedy Christians feel guilty, so the church can profit from their greed and guilt. That sounds terribly cynical, but the line occurred to me when I was sitting in a beautiful three thousand seat, hi-tech sanctuary, equipped with huge video screens and a state-of-the art sound system, situated on a multi-million dollar church campus, and the pastor was preaching from the prophet Haggai. The pastor avoided leveling any materialistic indictment against the congregation. He assured the people that the Lord wanted them to prosper and to enjoy the good life. “Success,” he assured them, “can be a sign of God’s blessing.” However, he felt compelled to inform them that their church was in ruins, yes, that’s right in ruins, just like the house of God in Haggai’s day, because they were three hundred thousand dollars behind in the general operating budget. “In a manner of speaking,” he said, “you could say we too are in ruins!” No one gasped at this description. But they should have.

The tension in the text leads to the passion of the passage. We have to be careful not to

truncate the text and edit out the tension. Many sermons miss the tension, because they skip over what the text is all about. Preachers select what they want to bring out from the text and ignore the context. They feel free to isolate a verse or lift out a line as a springboard into a sermon. They neglect the original tension in the text and preach a positive sermon on how to be a better Christian. They are preaching from the Bible but they ignore the tension that is there in the text between merit and mercy, judgment and salvation, the putting off and the putting on, sin and grace, idolatry and worship. Conventional sermons tell a clever opening story, plow through a text, make a few points and draw a conclusion, but in the process miss the passion of the passage.

Truncating the text can be a problem for those who take the text seriously. I recently heard a sermon on Paul's word of affirmation to the church at Philippi: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. . ." (1:29). The preacher spent forty minutes listing six or seven reasons why Christians benefit from suffering. He referenced texts from all over Scripture to make his points. His tone was that of a scholar listing points instead of a pastor encouraging people who are suffering. The preacher might just as well have been giving a lecture on the benefits of regular physical check-ups. He never referred to the poignant tension between belief and suffering. He never asked the congregation if their belief in Christ had been tested by their suffering for Christ. The apostle Paul emphasized the privilege, "For it has been granted to you. . ." but the preacher focused more on information about suffering than comfort for those who were suffering.

He addressed his upper middle class congregation, worshiping in their new 14 million dollar sanctuary, as if suffering were a potential problem that he wanted them prepared for in the future. But there must have been at least a few believers in such a large congregation who were experiencing the crucible of suffering. What if they had been raised up as examples to us of those who were granted the privilege of going beyond belief to suffering? I thought of this because I was sitting next to a man who had suffered long and hard on the mission field and now his wife lay dying at home. I wondered how he was receiving this exposition on biblical suffering.

Søren Kierkegaard lamented that Christianity without Christ sought "to accomplish a great deal in the world, and to win great multitudes who desire also to be Christians only up to a certain point."¹ The possibility of offense was to be avoided at all cost. The purpose of Christianity was not to become like Jesus but to gain the approval and esteem of others. Self-respect rather than self-denial was the motivation for Christianity without Christ. Kierkegaard claimed that avoiding the offense was "out of hypocrisy or out of

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 108-109.

whimpering human sympathy for yourself or others.” He concluded that preaching perpetually emphasized success and triumph—“in short, one hears only sermons, which might properly end with Hurrah! rather than with Amen.” Becoming a Christian, complained Kierkegaard, meant joining a parade, not taking up a cross.

Poor preaching can be used mightily by the Spirit of Christ to preach the Gospel and make disciples. It happens every Sunday morning, but that’s no excuse for poor preaching. Thankfully, “God in his ordinary providence makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above and against them, at his pleasure” —and for his glory! (Westminster Confession, on Providence, V, 3). How much better when the preacher is standing on the fault line between the mystery of God and the mess of the human condition and preaches the Word as it was intended to be preached. Good preaching requires discernment and hard work. It doesn’t take a genius. It takes someone who will pay attention prayerfully and thoughtfully to God’s overarching salvation history, the original intention of the passage, the context of the text, and the people to whom one is preaching. We can do better.

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