

Sermons

by David E. Moss

Chapter One

ARE SERMONS OBSOLETE?

I recently heard of a Church where the Morning Worship Service is one hour and fifteen minutes long: one hour of "preliminaries" and a fifteen minute message tacked on the end. And this was not a "liberal" church.

There is a definite trend today away from the traditional sermon as the mainstay of our Worship Services. In an attempt to revitalize "worship", Churches are unwittingly redefining worship. They are hiring Worship Leaders and assembling Worship Teams and leading the Congregation in folksy exercises labelled worship. Songs run the entire spectrum of rock, folk, jazz and country styles. The music is supplemented with interactive Scripture readings, drama and multimedia presentations. Sermons end up being short devotionals made up mostly of story telling application.

Some come away from these services truly "uplifted." The experience is gratifying and exhilarating. The appeal is drawing literally thousands of people into rapidly growing congregations where "meeting the needs" of people is the priority.

But is this real worship? And are real needs being met? Or, are only surface felt needs being met? (Many times churches end up simply giving people what they want and not what they really need. They pacify their worldly lusts and give it a religious label.) Does worship come first and the sermon later - if there is time? Or, is the sermon a part of worship? And, if so, how important a part?

Why the Sermon is Part of Worship

What does God want from man more than anything else? He simply wants to be acknowledged as God. Not a god. Not even just our God. But God. **The** God. The **Only** God. The One of whom it is said, "there is none else."

To respect, honour, and cherish the Word of God enough to listen intently when it is read aloud, expounded upon and preached about is the very epitome of worshipping God.

When you think about it, this is a pretty awesome thing. God is the All Powerful One who created everything out of nothing. He sits on the Throne of Sovereignty. No one compares to Him. He knows everything. He is all wise. He is present everywhere at the same time. His attributes are all magnificent, He has no limitations in any regard, and there is no way to adequately describe or explain Him. His thoughts are not our thoughts and He is beyond our imagination.

So how do we puny little creatures on this tiny little planet out in the middle of an

immeasurable universe come to know this incomparable God? Except for one thing, we never would. That one thing is the fact that God reveals Himself to us. In the beginning He spoke directly to Adam. He also spoke directly to Cain and corrected him personally. It was not very long, however, until God began speaking to most people through selected human beings. Noah preached righteousness even before the flood (II Peter 2:5). Throughout the Old Testament there is an extensive record of those who proclaimed the truth in an appeal to mankind to acknowledge God. The essence of the message is particularly emphasized over and over by Ezekiel who quotes the Almighty saying "that they may know that I am the Lord." The New Testament does not change a thing. Even Jesus stood before multitudes or in smaller sessions with his disciples and preached, sometimes lengthy, sermons. Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, Apollos was a great persuader through his sermons and Paul was prolific in standing or sitting in front of groups of people and communicating the truth. One time he even preached so long, someone fell asleep in a window and fell to his death.

The message given by the preacher, if he is legitimate, is not the words which man's wisdom teaches, but the Word of God illuminated by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Explaining, interpreting, illustrating and applying, the preacher is used of God to bring the hearers to an understanding of what He has said in revealing Himself to mankind.

We have come to expect truth to be served on a platter in bite sized pieces. We want it to be quick and effortless.

How important is the Word of God? The Word of God is so much a part of Himself that God magnified His Word above His Name (Psalm 138:2). The Word of God is so much a part of Himself that God called His own son The Word (John 1:1). To respect, honour, and cherish the Word of God enough to listen intently when it is read aloud, expounded upon and preached about is the very epitome of worshipping God. Preaching has been the device from time immemorial which has connected people directly to God by contemplating together the very personal words that proceeded directly from the heart of God. (Note that only in the last two centuries has the Bible been so readily available to the general public for them to read and study so intensely on their own. And only in the last three generations has this become such a reality.) To separate preaching from worship is like separating red blood cells from blood. You have the good white cells remaining, but that is not enough to keep a person alive. Thus, preaching cannot be separated from praying or singing praises. They are all together the aspects of worship and should be utilized in combination with each other in the acknowledging of God. Even music and praying are to contribute to a person's understanding and not just be "worship experience" (I Corinthians 14:15,26).

Why Are Meaty Sermons Becoming Less Popular?

Our minds are numb.

Seriously. We are gradually losing the ability to think, reason and follow the logical progression of thought development for more than very brief periods of time.

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We live in the day of instantaneous gratification. We can pull up to a "fast food" restaurant and have our meal in less than 60 seconds. We can push a button and be instantly entertained with sports, music, drama, or anything one can imagine. We can use calculators to do the most complicated mathematic configurations in a matter of seconds. We can drive our cars or fly airplanes and cover immense amounts of space in a very short period of time. We can go to a store and immediately have a suit of clothes that just 100 years ago we would have waited days if not weeks to obtain. And so we have come to expect truth to be served on a platter in bite sized pieces. We want it to be quick and effortless so that we can continue to rush through all of our instantaneous experiences and not have to stop and think.

The mind is a marvelous resource that God has provided to each human being. It is capable of great things if nurtured and trained to function effectively. It is with the mind that we come to serve the law of God (Romans 7:25), to understand His precepts, His statutes, His righteousness. It is in the renewing of the mind that we develop the capacity to conform to the good and acceptable will of God (Romans 12:1-2). It is through the mind of Christ that we understand, by the Holy Spirit, all of the marvelous things that God has prepared for us (I Corinthians 2:9-16). It is the spirit of a sound mind that God has given to us to suppress the fears by which our flesh is so easily overcome (II Timothy 1:7).

By consistently exposing people to substantive sermons, and by encouraging them to follow up with serious meditation at home, we can increase the average person's capacity to think about truth and absorb it into their lives.

If in the guise of "worship" and "religious activity" we by-pass the interaction of the mind with the intricacies of the Word of God, we will suffer immense loss. Through carefully prepared analysis called "preaching," we have the opportunity to benefit from men who have been called of God to immerse themselves in Him and His Word with all of their available energy. This is not to say that we cannot all study the Bible and learn from it independently. Neither is this to suggest that there is a difference in value between the "clergy" and the "laity." But in real terms, the cares of this life consume a large portion of the average person's energy and time (I Corinthians 7:33-34). Most people simply do not have the opportunity to take themselves to the depths of the Word experienced by preachers who have the privilege of studying the Scriptures as a vocation. Thus, the Bible testifies that those who labour in the word and doctrine are especially worthy of double honour (I Timothy 5:17). (This is why paying preachers so that they can spend their energy in the service of the Word is so important - I Corinthians 9:7-11.)

By-passing the mind is precisely the problem of our day. We think we are so intelligent because of the amount of information we possess. Instead, our minds are becoming mere storage bins for large quantities of frivolous facts, while we are rapidly losing the capacity to reason and digest substantive concepts. We have come from the days when a room full of hungry people could listen to an Apostle Paul expound upon the Scriptures until midnight (Acts 20:7) to our present day when we thrive on "sound bites" for our spiritual nourishment.

The Solution

The rationale of our day is to evaluate the condition of people and adapt our ministry to them. I believe we must have a higher goal. Instead of lowering the standards of ministry to accommodate the limited capacity of the average person, we need to train and educate the people to restore them to their real potential.

We are not helping the church by shortening our sermons in order to pacify the impatience of people who want to move on quickly to other things. By consistently exposing people to substantive sermons, and by encouraging them to follow up with serious meditation at home, we can increase the average person's capacity to think about truth and absorb it into their lives.

Sermons are not obsolete. We just need to rediscover their real value.

Chapter Two

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF A SERMON

Information in our media blitzed world is most often distributed today in sound bites, those attempts to communicate entire events or whole concepts in extremely brief statements. They are grossly inadequate devices and because of their brevity, usually fail to include all of the pertinent details. Thus the listener can be left with an impression that may not be entirely accurate.

Sermons should be the exact opposite of sound bites. By nature, sermons are thorough examinations of truth. They should present to the listener as much opportunity as possible to understand, digest and absorb the full scope of the subject being presented.

Many people may fail to get from a sermon all that is available to them, simply because they do not understand how a sermon works. They may view it merely as a religious exercise that should not go beyond the appointed time for the end of the service, instead of seeing it as a vital means that God uses to communicate the truth of His Word to the lives of His people.

The following is a brief analysis of the make-up of sermons. It may, in fact, be little more than a sound bite on the subject. Hopefully, it will be sufficient to increase your appreciation for the potential of the sermons to which you will be listening in the future.

The Format of a Sermon

There are several different types of sermon formats. The three most common are "topical," "textual" and "expository."

1. TOPICAL SERMONS. As the name suggests, topical sermons begin with a subject. The subject may consist of a spiritual characteristic, a behaviour, an issue, a point of doctrine, or simply be a "word study." The objective of this type of sermon is to collect Scriptural thoughts on the subject from anywhere in the Bible and compile an outline from this information.

2. TEXTUAL SERMONS. Textual and topical sermons are very similar. Topical sermons begin with a subject and look for Bible texts which discuss it. The textual sermon, on the other hand, begins with a Bible verse or passage and allows the text to suggest a topic. The text may even suggest an outline. In Textual sermons, however, there may be frequent departures from the text by referring to other parts of the Bible which add ideas or information to the suggested

topic of the beginning text.

3. EXPOSITORY SERMONS. An expository sermon is a detailed explanation of the meaning of a particular passage of Scripture. This kind of sermon will attempt to give the sense of each word, each phrase, each sentence, each verse, and each group of verses, usually without referring to other parts of Scripture. The text will be fully developed within its own context. Sometimes, this method of preaching allows several subjects to be dealt with in one sermon as they appear in the text.

The Content of A Sermon

1. EXPLANATION. This part of the sermon presents the literal meaning of a Scriptural text. It may also be termed the "interpretation." There is an endless list of things derived from Scripture itself that can be included in this exercise: such as, the grammar of the sentence, the definition of words, the context of the verse, who is speaking, who is being spoken to, the historical, social, ethnic, and cultural setting. There are figures of speech to be considered, other verses to be compared and endless other details that may enhance the actual meaning of the text.

2. ILLUSTRATION. This part of the sermon attempts to highlight the meaning of Scripture and help the listener understand certain concepts. The material can be gathered from the Scripture itself or from other sources. History, science, animal life, nature, the experience and habits of human beings are all potential sources of illustrations. Jesus is the supreme example of one who could take the simplest things from man's practical experience and draw spiritual analogies in them.

3. APPLICATION. This part of the sermon relates the meaning of the Scripture text to contemporary experience. Most sermons should include some reference as to how the information presented relates directly to the lives of those who are listening. This will help the listener absorb the material and bring about change for the better in his life.

The Purpose of A Sermon

Not every sermon will have the same objective. Sometimes, a sermon will be designed to simply inform. The application of such sermons may be implied in their content or may be left entirely to the hearer. If a given sermon does not include a specific application, it is not necessarily a bad sermon. We are all personally responsible to respond to truth and act as the people did on the day of Pentecost when Peter preached in Acts 2. After hearing the truth, they asked, "Now what do we do?"

Other sermons may be designed to comfort. Life is filled with anxieties, fears, guilt, and many other negative experiences. In I Thessalonians 3:2-3, Paul records that he "sent Timothy, our brother, and minister of God and our fellow labourer in the Gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith; that no man should be moved by these afflictions." In these volatile days in which we live, we can use all the reassurance we can get.

Still other sermons may be designed to challenge. None of our lives are perfectly accurate with regard to the righteousness of God. We are all in need of continual correction. And so it is in II Timothy 4:2 that the Pastor is admonished to "preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." From these kinds of sermons we are confronted with the error of our ways and challenged to change by

confessing and repenting and following righteousness.

The Importance of Balance

Some people have the wrong idea about sermons. They think that unless you are hammering people on the head and making them feel uncomfortable and hounding them to a point of decision about something, that you have not preached. Others think that sermons ought to affirm us in what we are doing and send us home feeling good about ourselves and our relationship with God. In fact, sermons may have many different objectives. A good preacher will provide a balanced diet to his congregation by preaching a variety of sermons that meet a variety of needs. Any congregation that is fed the same thing over and over again will become very stale.

Every local church is made up of a group of people characterized by diversity. There is usually a representation of every age group, differing economic statuses, differing ethnic, cultural and educational backgrounds, differing family situations, differing physical, emotional and psychological needs and above all, differing levels of spiritual maturity. Along with this is all the different baggage we bring with us into a church service from the different experiences of the preceding days and weeks creating a multitude of differing immediate needs within the group.

It is for this reason that some sermons will be very simplistic, designed to whet the appetite or minister to those who are immature in their Christian faith. Other sermons will be hard to chew and perhaps even difficult to understand. These are for the more mature. Some sermons will be designed to help us understand particular needs so that we can become more effective in ministry. Other sermons will attack particular sins so that the hearers can escape them or avoid them. Still other sermons will explain exercises of ministry so that we can enhance the effectiveness of the local church. Preaching to a diverse group of people requires balance.

How To Get The Most Out Of A Sermon

Every sermon, whether informational, comforting, or challenging, will have something in it the hearer can apply to his personal life. The preacher has prepared the material to meet a need. The listener should take advantage of all this research and preparation by responding to the sermon in some very specific ways so that the sermon, rather than being lost to the air, is translated into the life as food for spiritual nourishment.

First, after the sermon is over, meditate upon the concept that was presented. Try to understand the concept as a spiritual truth taught by the Word of God. Genuine understanding of truth is the most important step. Jesus said it is the truth that sets us free.

Second, consider how this truth applies to your own personal life. With the diverse grouping of people in any given congregation, it is impossible for a preacher to provide every listener with an appropriate application. Applications that are offered are usually only suggestions to get the listener started in a particular direction. For you to get the most out of a sermon, you must apply the spiritual truth conceptualized in the sermon in a unique and very personal way for yourself.

Immediately following this article is the description of a more in-depth response to sermons. It is called a "Discipleship Exercise."

Finally

The preaching and teaching of the Word of God must be the most important activity of the church. It is for this reason that I attempt to give a substantial portion of my time to the study of the Word in preparation for sermons. Everything we do as a Christian will stem from what we know about the Word. While learning on our own is certainly possible and advisable, God has given us the mandate of preaching. May it not just be a religious exercise, but an exercise of true edification.

A DISCIPLESHIP EXERCISE IN RESPONDING TO SERMONS

Disciples of Christ often feel the need for systematic Bible training. Yet with the complexity of our modern day schedules, it is difficult to commit "another night out" for such classes. You may be thinking, "if only I had the time to go to a Bible Institute, I know I could be a better servant for the Lord." Here is a suggestion as to how you may use the sermons of regularly scheduled church services to accomplish the same thing as a Bible Institute.

So much energy goes into sermon preparation, but so little energy in responding to them. As the Pastor conscientiously prepares his sermons to communicate truth, he fits the role of a professor to the Congregation. The following exercise suggests how to take advantage of the sermons as a student would the lectures of a Bible college classroom. In this way you may receive a Bible education without that "other night out" or without the church creating additional programs.

1. Select one service per week for this exercise. Sunday Evening services are probably the most appropriate with which to begin.
2. Following this exercise in the same service each week throughout a series of messages serves the same value as taking a course in a Bible College on that same designated subject.
3. Attend the selected service with pen and paper, being prepared to take notes just as you would in a school class room.
4. During the sermon presentation, take sufficient notes that will allow you to write a response. During the week following the sermon, write a paper which includes the following items:
 - a. An outline of the sermon.
 - b. A paragraph discussing the basic theme and point of the sermon.
 - c. A paragraph discussing the doctrinal substance of the sermon.
 - d. A paragraph discussing new information you gained from the sermon.
 - e. A paragraph discussing questions raised in your mind as a result of the sermon.
 - f. A paragraph summarizing your response to the sermon, the personal application you have made.
5. Submit this paper to the Pastor within one week of his preaching the sermon you are critiquing.
6. During the course, ask the Pastor to quiz you on the material being covered.
7. At the end of the course, ask the Pastor to give you a test on all of the material included

in the series.

Please Note:

This exercise was suggested to me by Missionary, Marc Blackwell. He has used something similar to this in discipling people in South Africa. I have merely adapted it in my own words.