

THE FOLSOM
VIEW

“...HAVING THE EYES OF YOUR HEART ENLIGHTENED...” EPHESIANS 1:18

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Preaching's Aim

I was listening the other day to an extremely talented young preacher who preaches for a large community church in Dallas that is growing very quickly. Of course, I differ with him radically on some doctrinal points, but I enjoy listening to him because his view of Scripture is otherwise quite conservative. Not only that, but his sermons are longer than mine! In this day when the “experts” tell you to keep it at 20 minutes or less, I love the fact that a preacher for a church that is growing by leaps and bounds is preaching for almost an hour every week.

And his sermons are not soft. As we used to say in the 60s, he “tells it like it is. There are times that his rebuke of the church will shock you. He will tell the people in the pews that they need to change or grow up or quit being idiots (I’m not kidding).

It reminds me of a sermon I heard one time by a black preacher. He was preaching somewhere in neighborhood of Phil. 3:2 where Paul says, “look out for the dogs.” The preacher proceeded to discuss various kinds of dogs — the “feisty” dogs, the “show” dogs, “the big” dogs — and followed each with the words, “and there are some of these dogs in our church!”

I can’t recommend the sermon from the standpoint of it being a good exposition of the passage, but the preacher’s candor was refreshing. I get so tired of hearing people talk about “negative” and “positive” preaching. I don’t think serious disciples give it a thought. The people who are concerned about “positive” and “negative” are the ones who want to be artificially pumped up, told they are doing OK and left alone. They want their status balanced with their quo and they don’t want to be challenged to go to the next level.

Paul told Timothy to “preach the word, in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, and

exhort with complete patience and teaching” (II Tim. 4:2). “Reprove” and “rebuke” are pretty strong words. Even the word “exhort” implies some strong language, though it may be of a more “encouraging” type that “reprove” and “rebuke.”

The point is, preaching’s aim, as has often been said, is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” The truth is that in 2010, we are much more in danger of slipping into a comfortable place than we are in being afflicted. While it’s nice, once-in-awhile, to say everything is going well and just keep doing what you’re doing, there is not much meat in that spiritual meal. We can all do better and need to be pushed; that goes for the preacher, too.

It is a sign of immaturity to want to hear preaching that is nothing more than pabulum all the time (cf. Hebrews 5:11-13). Years ago, a friend was attending a local church of Christ and the church was looking for a preacher. The friend was distressed because the church only wanted to hire a guy who would preach on the plan of salvation all the time. His conclusion was probably correct: the plan of salvation is “safe” for those already consider themselves saved. There is no challenge in telling the baptized that baptism is necessary.

There’s a place for preaching that exalts the grace of God and gives people hope, of course. In fact, in some form or other, those themes ought to appear in nearly every sermon. But it’s a problem when people begin to analyze sermons, not based on their content or biblical accuracy, but on how it makes them “feel.” How do you think the people felt during Peter’s first sermon, recorded in Acts 2? It was not seeker-friendly, was it? He said, “you murdered the Christ!” We know that some felt guilty enough to seek the grace of God, which was Peter’s aim. Most did not and probably walked away muttering something about how negative his sermon was.

If a sermon's purpose is not to shake us up and delineate the qualities of true disciples from false ones, then what's the point? Are we not here to improve ourselves, to get a clearer picture of what God wants from us? Isn't the aim of our teaching to present Christ as the ideal and urge us to be transformed into His image (Rom. 8:29)?

If you follow all the examples of preaching in Scripture — starting with Moses and the prophets and proceeding through Jesus and the apostles — you're not going to hear a bunch of watered down platitudes, are you? Think about it for a minute. Look at Amos, who was a regular guy pressed into the duty of a prophet (Amos 7:14-15). In 4:1, to his own people, he says this: "Hear this, you cows of Bashan..." and, in 6:1, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion!"

The fact that I have never called anyone a cow, at least not from the pulpit, only makes me wonder if I am doing something wrong. It makes me ask if I measure my words too carefully or couch them in clouds of vagueness so that people won't dislike me. You can't read these prophets and the words of Jesus without wondering if we have become way too politically correct.

I would urge those of you who are speaking on Wednesday night — you are the sons of Amos! — to be emboldened to "speak boldly as you ought to speak" (Eph. 6:20). If the text takes a strident turn, preach the text, not only in its content but in its form.

The last thing I want to do in my life is to be one of those false prophets who run around telling the church that everything is hunky dory. Jeremiah had to deal with those kind of men in his day. He spoke of prophets who came along, greedy for gain; that "gain" is probably money, but there are also "prophets" who preach to be liked. He said they "heal the wound of my people lightly, saying 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14).

Do you see the problem there? When Paul gave Timothy the instructions to "preach the word, in season and out of season" he followed with the warning that the time would come when people would not endure sound teaching but look instead for preachers who scratch their

itching ears (II Tim. 4:3). In other words, they will not "endure" — which implies some suffering — preaching that challenges them, but only preaching that tells them what they want to hear. Why would need to "endure" that? I don't want to stand before God at judgment as an ear-scratcher.

As Dee Bowman says, preachers have one primary role: to "storm the will" of the listeners. All of us all have established our battle lines and dug our foxholes to protect some pet thought or practice. We all resist change because change is hard. We have built mental fortifications against being told we are wrong. The preacher's mission must be arm himself with biblical weapons and storm that fort, to "destroy strongholds... destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God" (II Cor. 10:5).

That's the preacher's most important task and his biblical mandate. His role is not — and this will be surprising to some — to become a "professional visitor." As a Christian, he has the same responsibilities as you have, to visit the sick and help those who need help. But those aren't preacher duties.

At one of the first churches I preached for, I realized a few people were disgruntled with me because I didn't "visit" around like the preacher before me. Turns out, he visited certain people, especially those who cooked really well, and he happened to show up around lunch time every day. Also turns out that a lot of people in that smaller church had never seen the inside of his house, not even after 5 years.

No, a preacher's role is not to become the designated visitor and ambassador for the church. His role is clearly defined in Scripture. His role is to preach and teach to urge people toward transformation. To do that, he must spend copious amounts of time with his nose in the word of God and then present lessons that encourage and challenge listeners to be like Christ. He does that by "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 3:15) even if speaking the truth makes enemies now and then (Gal. 4:16).

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