

The Undiminished Power of the Word of God: The Case from Practical Theology*

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The apostle Peter speaking in the house of Cornelius, Acts 10:42, “God commanded us to preach to the people.” Preaching is not a human invention. God commanded us to preach to the people. 1 Corinthians 9:16, the apostle says, “Woe be to me if I preach not the gospel.”

The question we have been facing during these days: “Will biblical preaching be passé?” And we have been seeking to make a case brick by brick, stone by stone, for the ongoing viability of biblical preaching, for the urgent necessity of biblical preaching. We have turned to the Scripture. We have turned to theology. Yesterday, we turned to church history and today we want to turn to practical theology in the actual outworking in the pragmatic experience of the church, even in our own time.

There are those who will concede that preaching has been of the essence. But they tell us, no longer; times have changed; the situation is different today. They tell us we are now living in postmodern times. And I would ask, “In your congregation how many are postmodern? Do you have some that are not postmodern? What percentage is postmodern?” Well you see, we’ve come to the point where propositions are really done in communication. It has to be the personal. Well, is it an either-or? With my sweetie, quite personal, but it is also propositional. We speak. Isn’t this a false dichotomy? This is not an either-or—it’s a both-and. Yes, but the linear thinking is over. I mean, one of the doyens, one of the gurus of homiletics among evangelicals in a recent issue of *Preaching* magazine said, “Linear thinking is done.” Oh, indeed, is it? Aren’t you speaking linear patterns? Do you know any books recently that are basically linear? As a matter of fact, of the thousands and thousands of books published in this country every year, there about five that aren’t linear and they don’t sell. I think we’re still fairly linear in our thinking. Well, but we’re inductive now, and, you know, the idea of universals,

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that's just not acceptable today. People won't listen to that kind of thing. We've got to become thoroughly, if not altogether, inductive in our preaching. Well, you know, it's an interesting thing, the postmoderns don't care for either induction or deduction, and so we're into narrative. You see, narrative is the whole thing. Isn't narrative linear? I mean narrative, a good narrative, is quite sequential. That's linear. Folks, we've got to reflect a little on some of the bilge we hear in conferences on preaching.

Now George Barna is seen by some as a prophet and others as a false prophet. And he tells us that "our discourse must be non-threatening and non-dogmatic, and our discourse needs to supply inspiration, not exposition." I'm quoting him directly. Oh, I see. Non-dogmatic. You mean like, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me, I think?" I mean, to what degree and extent will you now reduce the dogmatic assertions of Holy Scripture? At what point does being user-friendly become a betrayal of the gospel? Will we be the first generation that succeeds in removing the offense of the gospel? Is that really a worthy objective? To sanitize Christian discourse of what is conceivably objectionable? Now really, our generation seems to revel in books like entertainment evangelism, an oxymoron if I ever heard it. So, I mean really, isn't there a line, how much concession we can make? How far do we go without giving away the store? That's the issue.

So, I read in one periodical that a certain church advertising itself as "God's country goodtime hour" promises line dancing following the worship service. Their band is called "Honky Tonk Angels" and the pastor participates in the charade.

The *Wall Street Journal* describes a church in the buckle of the Bible belt that calls itself the "fellowship of excitement." It runs an advertisement for their Sunday evening meeting circus. "See Barnum and Bailey bested as the magic of the big top circus comes to the fellowship of excitement. Clowns, acrobats, animals, popcorn, what a great night!" Ugh! The same church had the pastoral staff put on a wrestling match during a Sunday service. They hired a professional wrestler to train them how to throw one another around the ring, pull hair, kick shins, without actually hurting one another. Now folks, all of this in the name of "I become all things to all men that I might by all means save some." But remember, in that same context the apostle says, "Woe be to me if I preach not the gospel."

I knew a man who said, "I'm going to get close to the boys down on Main Street in the pool hall." And he resorted to the pool hall night-by-night, week-by-week, month-by-month. He was in the pool hall. He was in the cigarette fumery of the pool hall. He was in the alcohol surroundings of the pool hall, and one night a young man said to him,

“You know Reverend, strange thing, you’re becoming more like us than we’re becoming like you.” There’s the danger.

In my class at Fuller Theological Seminary back in the 50s we had the son of the distinguished Christian preacher and apologist, Dr. Harry Rimmer. His name was Brandon Rimmer. A very interesting chap, I found him quite an engaging fellow. But he had the mission and call, he felt, to cocktail evangelism. We called him Brandy Rimmer. He became an alcoholic. I had a preacher in class one night, I think one of the finest preachers I ever had; his name is Tom. He came from a church way on the south side of Chicago. And he was going to preach for me the pericope, the raising of Lazarus from the dead—John 11. Listen, I mean to tell you the young man could preach. Wow, he preached. It was powerful on the empathetic Christ, how compassionate Jesus was to Mary and Martha in the loss of their brother. And he really had us almost in tears as he pled with us to be empathetic and sympathetic and compassionate, and it was beautiful, and he said, “Amen,” and he sat down. And I said to him in the instructor’s review after the sermon, “Brother, what happened to the raising of Lazarus from the dead?” I said, “It looks to me that this passage really is about the miracle of the raising of Lazarus. Where did it go?” “Oh, but you’ve got to understand, we can’t preach on things like that in our church.” I said, “You can’t?” “Oh no, we hope to get to issues like that somewhere down the road, but for the present, such miracles, that is offensive to the modern mind. This is a problem to talk about them. That gets people all mixed up.” “Brother, ‘F,’ you didn’t preach that text. And as to your approach, do you realize bait and switch is a felony in the state of Illinois? You pull people in on one pretext and give them something else, you can go to jail for that.” Folks, we’ve got too much of that right now.

I preached in a church not long ago and the pastor gave me instructions about the day of his absence. He said, “Now, whatever you do, don’t quote the Bible.” I said, “I beg pardon?” “Don’t carry your Bible into the pulpit.” Folks, this is an earnest man. This is a sincere man. He was trained in our school. He is a great success. But you don’t quote from the Bible in a church. Folks, there is something wrong there. He may be listening to George Barna, a man who always asks, “Which way is the wind blowing?” As far as I’m concerned, George Barna is gone with the wind. I can take just about so much because, folks, God commanded us to preach to the people. Now, where are the people to whom we speak? Let’s get to their basic attack, you know, on the historic strategy and conviction of the Christian church with respect to the efficacy of the preaching of the gospel under the Holy Spirit. We’ve got to be concerned about our audience. We don’t just pipe into the breeze.

Arthur Baird is an interesting student in his audience criticism and he points out that in eighty percent of the logi of the New Testament, the hearers are designated, whether it's the apostles or the multitude or the religious establishment; I mean, in the preponderance of discourse in the Gospels to whom it was spoken is clear.

We've got to be concerned; to whom are we talking? This is not always easy. Sometimes I feel like a hen trying to lay an egg on an escalator. The target keeps moving. And I think, from my standpoint, the kind of audience analysis that I make yields the fact we are speaking to a very, an increasingly heterogeneous population that is very hybrid.

The analysis that gives basically in the seminars that are legion about preaching in postmodern times—a title that annoys me a bit—is that of course there was historic Christianity, which for so many hundreds of years even if people were not Christians, they recognized Christian morality and ethics as the norm, believed in God, believed in hell, believed in heaven, whether or not they had actually made a commitment of their lives to Christ. Then beginning with the fall of the French Bastille in 1789, to the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, we have the Enlightenment. This is the primacy of human reason. There still is a recognition that there at least are high probabilities through the scientific method of discerning what truth is. But opinions may differ as to what the truth is, but there is truth. Now we have gone beyond that and we are in postmodern times.

I think that is a faulty analysis. It is convenient. It is simplistic. It is reductionistic. It's too easy. Folks, let's face it; there are still a lot of post-enlightenment rationalists in our society. Science is not done. The man of the century was Albert Einstein. He is an Enlightenment product. Not far from here, just recently by Professor Pascal Boyer at Washington University-St. Louis, a book in the spirit of the French Enlightenment, Basic Books, entitled, *The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. Folks, it is pure enlightenment rationalism. It is not only in the academy in the biology department, but there are a lot of people in our culture for whom science is the be-all and the end-all—and that is a fact; a lot of them. You can't say it's all postmodern. That's an overstatement. That's too quick a generalization. We've got a lot of historic romanticists. Romanticism was the protest by people who basically held enlightenment presuppositions but to have said they are a little too sterile as you state them. This is Goethe in Germany. This is Wordsworth. This is Coleridge. You know, look there is feeling. There is art. There is poetry. Let's not just reduce it down to some theorem or some laboratory experiment. We've got a lot of classic romanticists left. They just flock into Orchestra Hall and into Ravinia in season. You know, we've got a lot of New Agers. We've got people, millions of people in this country,

into horoscopes. You know, they basically have been pre-evangelized. They're conceding that science can't tell us everything. But they're of course in the mists as to what is spiritual reality. But they are half prepared for the gospel already. They've made some basic concessions in thought. New Age—say, in all this discussion, why have we forgotten about existentialism? There still is a lot of existentialism. It rose after the Second World War, a kind of despair, epistemological agnosticism, the foundation of Barthian neo-orthodoxy. You know, this is not all new, some of this.

And then we do have genuine “pomo”—postmodernism. I think many of these are orphans of the disaster which befell Marxism. Marxism—kaput. They are now “pomo.” I think that postmodernism with its denial of meta-narrative, no lines between the dots, its denial of objective truth, I herald it as a challenge to the sterilities of enlightenment rationalism, to be sure, but I think it's a kind of Gnosticism turned in on itself. And I think that enlightenment rationalism and postmodernism have a great deal in common. One is, a sense, the further step beyond that's logical. You've got pluralism; you've got relativism; you've got secularism; you've got narcissism. All of these “isms” and “sisms” and “asms” and “spasms,” you know, it's all there in a hodgepodge. There is no doubt that with literary deconstruction at its core there are postmodern vibes, not only on campuses, but we feel these in society. No truth—that filters down at a popular level. I do not think it is, you know, just sweeping the field. Gertrude Himmelfarb points out that already in Europe there is post-postmodernism. Our variety of postmodernism is not political enough, you understand. And they would say that narrative is oppression, you know. Grammar is oppression. But how do you live that way? That's the issue. We have in Chicago one of the princes of postmodernism, Stanley Fish, the provost of the University of Illinois, Chicago campus, lured from Duke by a salary of \$250,000 a year with endless perks. Now here is a man on “Larry King Live”; Larry tried to push him to concede that Hitler and the Holocaust were evil. He would not be pushed. He would not concede within his premises that Hitler and the Holocaust were evil. And yet, Stanley Fish has just published his second book on John Milton, and he said—I quote—“Now I will show you what Milton really meant.” How does that fit? It's a blooming, buzzing confusion. That's what it is. And Richard Rorty, a professor at my alma mater, Stanford on the west coast—fascinating, this man who has majored, you know, in destroying truth structures on every side—is now on record as saying, “I will live my life, not by the first table of the law, but by the second table of the law, and what I want you to know is, and nowhere is it said better than in 1 Corinthians 13 . . .” That's Richard Rorty. How do you figure it?

I want to say, brothers and sisters, I think we have a very hybrid audience, and add to this, post-9/11 stress. There are people in our audiences—my daughter lives in Westchester County, New York; in her small community eight dads will never come back. You mean to tell me that's not a factor in Christian communication? All these seminars? Look, you begin talking about “pomo” and enlightenment rationalism and New Age, and we've got the Builders, and then the Boomers, and then the Busters, Generation-X. And then we've got the Bubbles, the Millennials. And we've got some of our hearers who are more visual, and some are more auditory, and some are more kinesthetic, and I am a preacher, and I am preparing my message. They're all out there. What's my time allocation going to be? I mean, are you going to say, “Well, five minutes I will aim toward the kinesthetic postmoderns?” If I did not believe in the Holy Spirit, I would go bonkers. But folks, look, contextualization is nothing new. Our missionaries have been doing it in the most bizarre circumstances. We are doing it every week, and I believe in the Holy Ghost.

Now remember, when John Calvin was in St. Peter's there in Geneva, when he'd go into the pulpit his lips were always moving. And you know, nobody was thinking, well he's practicing his opening lines, because they were never great opening lines. You know, it was, we left off last time in chapter 58. But some of the officary became curious. What is John Calvin saying? So someone slipped up close enough to hear among the wheezes what he was saying and I will tell you what he was saying, “Come Holy Spirit, come. Come Holy Spirit, come.”

I hear the problems and the objections to linear reason and all of this, but what else is new? This is not sufficient cause for jettisoning the supernatural gospel. What do our listeners need? Kuyper, Abraham Kuyper, founder of the Free University in Amsterdam, as you know, prime minister of the Netherlands, parish pastor, he was unloading week-by-week a lot of philosophic jargon, and I mean there was a little lady, Pietje Balthus, and she sent a little note in her scratchy handwriting, “Dear Pastor Kuyper, you are not giving us much Bread of Life these days.” He was shaken. The Lord smote him. He said, “I repent,” and he began to preach Jesus and he kept her picture in his study to his dying day. My friends, I want to give them the Bread of Life. Is not our call, to use Needworth's categories, at this point to be counter-cultural in order to win culture? It's Flannery O'Connor—when the world pushes me hard, I push back harder. What is the empirical data? What is the evidence? All right, I'll lay it out. Haddon Robinson, clear as a bell, as always: “More people are converted through preaching and teaching than by any other means.” He supports it empirically. I think he is right. Howard Hendricks: “The preaching of the word of God is still the bread

and butter.” A *Christianity Today* survey about worship preferences: fifty-two percent say, I prefer preaching-centered worship. That’s by far and away the leader—fifty-two percent. Next, seventeen percent: praised-centered; sixteen percent: liturgical; nine percent: creative drama. Fifty-two percent—I’m laying out the case. What are the facts in local ministry? Lyle Schaller, perennial church consultant, a man always on the move, I quote him, “The most effective preachers whose preaching is life changing are expository preachers.” That’s Lyle Schaller. I’ll take him for an ally. I say, “Thanks Lyle; that’s what I’ve thought all along.” The leader of the Billy Graham Schools on Evangelism—interesting statement—“Those converts in our follow-up that we send to churches where the pastor expounds Holy Scripture are inevitably and invariably the most healthy and the quickest to mature.” Amen. All Southern Baptist studies show preaching is still number one. It’s what the people want, what the people expect. Let’s not forget it. Church growth studies—look, from *Bib Sac* I have actual empirical data. I don’t want to be impaled on generalities and vague nebulosities. Here is a study—by far the aggregate total for sermons showed that biblical preaching was the significant factor in growth. Now I’m not one who genuflects at the shrine of the church growth movement, although I have found many, many blessings out of the earlier leaders in that movement, particularly. But I’ll tell you, their data shows it’s where the Bible is preached that churches will grow. Now there’s a quick growth that can come in other ways, flash fire, strange fire; and in the analysis of the sermons that matter, the biblical content of the messages was cited as the most significant factor. I’m just wanting to give you a battery of data which really supports staying with the word of God and not hastily or precipitously jettisoning what is the genius of the growth of the Christian church through the Holy Spirit. The solid word of God—it’s there. That’s it.

Interestingly enough, even some of the liberals are getting shaky. How do you understand Roland Allen, quintessential left-wing homiletician of Indianapolis, has just published a book, *Preaching Verse By Verse?* I mean, he says, “You never expected to hear this from me, but look, I’ve got to face the facts. Most people really want the Bible in the services.” He’s talking about his liberal constituency—the people who suffered in Methodism and Campbellitism of the left-wing variety all these years. He says, “Give them verse by verse. Preach forty-five minutes.” Hallelujah! I mean, here are the Lutherans, the ELCA, which is really an apostasy, but look at Luther Seminary, their large seminary in St. Paul, they have doubled their Bible requirements for preachers because their polls and studies of Lutheran parishioners indicated the

people want pastors to know their Bibles inside and outside and to teach from it.

Folks, widespread evidence here, the Barabbas syndrome should not be our tool. Give them what they want? No, they won't grow. Give them what they need; that really will satisfy; that's the direction we need to move. There are those who say, "But you're not speaking and answering the questions people are asking." Folks, people don't always ask the right questions. We've got to give the answers to the questions people need to ask, instead of just fawning and collapsing into towering pillars of Jell-O. Listen folks; bottom line: the word of God is living and powerful. This is seed to the sower and it's bread to the eater.

And you and I are living in the greatest day of gospel harvest in the history of the Christian church. Now, we're not keeping up with the birth rate—just a caution to you post-millennials. But apart from the North American church and the European church, the great sending senders, we're in the blahs; there is no question about that. We're severely acculturated, a very serious problem. But look, go with me, Central and South America, 300 people an hour are coming to Christ. Countries like Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay—something is happening. Folks, the word of God! Sub-Sahara black Africa, 700 people an hour are coming to Christ despite militant Islam. Folks, the challenge is there. Missiologists are saying that what's happening today in the People's Republic of China may be the greatest chapter in the history of the expansion of the Christian church. Folks, what an hour in which to live! Now folks, this is not the time to step aside from the power of the word of God; it's the power of the word of God that's doing this. This is what the Holy Spirit is doing. And we suddenly get apologetic for the old gospel and for the word of God and for exposition and we're going to drop the ball. That's what's going to happen if we are not careful. Go with me to Korea, South Korea; only 1,000 Christians there in 1900. Today a third of the country professes Christ. God knows those who are his. I can't say how much of this is genuine, but I'll say this: Sweetie and I go to Seoul, city of twelve million people, and at night every Christian church—the biggest Methodist church in the world is there; the biggest Baptist church, the biggest Pentecostal church, the biggest Presbyterian church—they're all in Seoul. It's just amazing. And every one of these little churches or big churches has a lighted red cross at night and I look out and in every direction, little crosses in Asia. And in India today, folks, hold your seat; listen, 1 out of every 6 Indians is a Dalit, an untouchable. They are arrested. They are sick and tired of Hinduism. It is apartheid as far as they are concerned. They have just been dispossessed all their lives. They're sick of it. And they have decided to move out of Hinduism.

They're going to go Buddhism or Christianity. Folks, right now the fat is in the fire. What a tremendous hour of gospel opportunity! And folks, even in our own land, I mean, something is happening in Generation X. Read Colleen Carroll's book, *The New Faithful*. You see, it is these sweeping generalizations that are so dangerous.

Who is to say where God will break forth next, you know? Would you have picked Generation X? I think they would have entered the bottom of my list. Something is happening. It is very mixed. It is happening in Judaism, Catholicism, evangelicalism, but not in modernism, not in mainline, old line, sideline churches. Nope—not there. Fully ten to fifteen percent of Generation X wants traditional theology, traditional worship, traditional ethics and morality. Would you have ever thought this possible? But folks, our God! This is not the time for us to dump the Bible and our confidence in the supernaturalness of Jesus.

I'm all for serious contextualization. But folks, the studies show, and now I'm leaving soon, so I can say this. The studies show that comparing, say, the Hudson Taylor or the John Nevius approach, one very contextualized, you know, the other not always so concerned to look Chinese or Korean—I am Western; I'm just going to preach—the results are no different. Do with it what you would like. William Lyon Phelps was probably one of the greatest lecturers at Yale since its origin, a wonderful Christian, a Browning scholar. He used to say, "I think on the cover of every Bible it should be embossed in big gold letters, 'Highly explosive, handle with care.'" You know, that's what I believe, and that's what you believe. Will preaching be passé? Unh-unh. No, nein, nyet, because God said preach to the people, and "woe be to us if we preach not the gospel." Amen.