

Dear Students of PM 525

Below are several posted by Albert Mohler on the primacy of preaching. Not required reading but thought you might be interested.

Dr. Ed Scarce

Expository Preaching and the Recovery of Christian Worship (Part One)

By Albert Mohler

Expository preaching is central, irreducible, and nonnegotiable to the Bible's mission of authentic worship that pleases God. John Stott's simple declaration states the issue boldly: "Preaching is indispensable to Christianity." More specifically, preaching is indispensable to Christian worship—and not only indispensable, but central.

Tuesday, August 9, 2005

Evangelical Christians have been especially attentive to worship in recent years, sparking a renaissance of thought and conversation on what worship really is and how it should be done. Even if this renewed interest has unfortunately resulted in what some have called the "worship wars" in some churches, it seems that what A. W. Tozer once called the "missing jewel" of evangelical worship is being recovered.

Nevertheless, if most evangelicals would quickly agree that worship is central to the life of the church, there would be no consensus to an unavoidable question: What is central to Christian worship? Historically, the more liturgical churches argued that the sacraments form the heart of Christian worship. These churches argue that the elements of the Lord's Supper and the water of baptism most powerfully present the gospel. Among evangelicals, some present a call for evangelism as the heart of worship, planning every facet of the service—songs, prayers, sermon—with the evangelistic invitation in mind.

Though most evangelicals mention the preaching of the word as a necessary or customary part of worship, the prevailing model of worship in evangelical churches is increasingly defined by music, along with innovations such as drama and video presentations. When preaching retreats, a host of entertaining innovations will take its place.

Traditional norms of worship are now subordinated to a demand for relevance and creativity. A media-driven culture of images has replaced the word-centered culture that gave birth to the

Reformation churches. In some sense, the image-driven culture of modern evangelicalism is an embrace of the very practices rejected by the Reformers in their quest for true biblical worship.

Music fills the space in most evangelical worship, and much of this music comes in the form of contemporary choruses marked by precious little theological content. Beyond the popularity of the chorus as a musical form, many evangelical churches seem intensely concerned to replicate studio-quality musical presentations.

In terms of musical style, the more traditional churches feature large choirs—often with orchestras—and may even sing the established hymns of the faith. Choral contributions are often massive in scale and professional in quality. In any event, music fills the space and drives the energy of the worship service. Intense planning, financial investment, and preparation are invested in the musical dimensions of worship. Professional staff and an army of volunteers spend much of the week in rehearsals and practice sessions.

All this is not lost on the congregation. Some Christians shop congregations in order to find the church that offers the worship style and experience that fits their expectation. In most communities, churches are known for their worship styles and musical programs. Those dissatisfied with what they find at one church can quickly move to another, sometimes using the language of self-expression to explain that the new church “meets our needs” or “allows us to worship.”

A concern for true biblical worship was at the very heart of the Reformation. But even Martin Luther, who wrote hymns and required his preachers to be trained in song, would not recognize this modern preoccupation with music as legitimate or healthy. Why? Because the Reformers were convinced that the heart of true biblical worship was the preaching of the word of God.

Thanks be to God, evangelism does take place in Christian worship. Confronted by the presentation of the gospel and the preaching of the word, sinners are drawn to faith in Jesus Christ and the offer of salvation is presented to all who so respond. Likewise, the Lord’s Supper and baptism are honored as ordinances by the Lord’s own command, and each finds its place in true worship.

Furthermore, music is one of God’s most precious gifts to his people, and it is a language by which we may worship God in spirit and in truth. The hymns of the faith convey rich confessional and theological content, and many modern choruses recover a sense of doxology formerly lost in many evangelical churches. But music is not the central act of Christian worship, nor is evangelism, nor even the ordinances. The heart of Christian worship is the authentic preaching of the word of God.

Expository preaching is central, irreducible, and nonnegotiable to the Bible’s mission of authentic worship that pleases God. John Stott’s simple declaration states the issue boldly: “Preaching is indispensable to Christianity.” More specifically, preaching is indispensable to Christian worship—and not only indispensable, but central.

The centrality of preaching is the theme of both testaments of Scripture. In Nehemiah 8 we find the people demanding that Ezra the scribe bring the book of the law to the assembly. Ezra and his colleagues stand on a raised platform and read from the book. When he opens the book to read, the assembly rises to its feet in honor of the word of God and their response to the reading is to answer, “Amen, Amen!”

Interestingly, the text explains that Ezra and those assisting him “read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8). This remarkable text presents a portrait of expository preaching. Once the text was read, it was carefully explained to the congregation. Ezra did not stage an event or orchestrate a spectacle—he simply and carefully proclaimed the word of God.

This text is a sobering indictment of much contemporary Christianity. According to the text, a demand for biblical preaching erupted within the hearts of the people. They gathered as a congregation and summoned the preacher. This reflects an intense hunger and thirst for the preaching of the word of God. Where is this desire evident among today’s evangelicals?

In far too many churches, the Bible is nearly silent. The public reading of Scripture has been dropped from many services, and the sermon has been sidelined, reduced to a brief devotional appended to the music. Many preachers accept this a necessary concession to the age of entertainment. Some hope to put in a brief message of encouragement or exhortation before the conclusion of the service.

As Michael Green so pointedly put it: “This is the age of the sermonette, and sermonettes make Christianettes.”

The anemia of evangelical worship—all the music and energy aside—is directly attributable to the absence of genuine expository preaching. Such preaching would confront the congregation with nothing less than the living and active word of God. That confrontation will shape the congregation as the Holy Spirit accompanies the word, opens eyes, and applies that word to human hearts.

Expository Preaching and the Recovery of Christian Worship (Part Two)

If preaching is central to Christian worship, what kind of preaching are we talking about? The sheer weightlessness of much contemporary preaching is a severe indictment of our superficial

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Many evangelicals are seduced by the proponents of topical and narrative preaching. The declarative force of Scripture is blunted by a demand for story, and the textual shape of the Bible is supplanted by topical considerations. In many pulpits, the Bible, if referenced at all, becomes merely a source for pithy aphorisms or convenient narratives.

The therapeutic concerns of the culture too often set the agenda for evangelical preaching. Issues of the self predominate, and the congregation expects to hear simple answers to complex problems. Furthermore, postmodernism claims intellectual primacy in the culture, and even if they do not surrender entirely to doctrinal relativism, the average congregant expects to make his or her own final decisions about all important issues of life, from worldview to lifestyle.

Authentic Christian preaching carries a note of authority and a demand for decisions not found elsewhere in society. The solid truth of Christianity stands in stark contrast to the flimsy pretensions of postmodernity. Unfortunately, the appetite for serious preaching has virtually disappeared among many Christians, who are content to have their fascinations with themselves encouraged from the pulpit.

One of the first steps to a recovery of authentic Christian preaching is to define exactly what we mean when we discuss authentic preaching as exposition. Many preachers claim to be expositors, but in many cases this means no more than that the preacher has a biblical text in mind, no matter how tenuous may be the actual relationship between the text and the sermon.

I offer the following definition of expository preaching as a framework for consideration:

“Expository preaching is that mode of Christian preaching that takes as its central purpose the presentation and application of the text of the Bible. All other issues and concerns are subordinated to the central task of presenting the biblical text. As the word of God, the text of Scripture has the right to establish both the substance and the structure of the sermon. Genuine exposition takes place when the preacher sets forth the meaning and message of the biblical text and makes clear how the word of God establishes the identity and worldview of the church as the people of God.”

Expository preaching begins with the preacher’s determination to present and explain the text of the Bible to his congregation. This simple starting point is a major issue of division in contemporary homiletics for many preachers assume that they must begin with a human problem or question and then work backward to the biblical text. On the contrary, expository preaching

begins with the text and works from the text to apply its truth to the lives of believers. If this determination and commitment are not clear at the outset, something other than expository preaching will result.

The preacher always comes to the text and to the preaching event with many concerns and priorities in mind, many of which are undeniably legitimate and important in their own right. Nevertheless, if genuine exposition of the word of God is to take place, those other concerns must be subordinate to the central and irreducible task of explaining and presenting the biblical text.

Expository preaching is inescapably bound to the serious work of exegesis. If the preacher is to explain the text, he must first study the text and devote the necessary hours of study and research necessary to understand the text. The pastor must invest the largest portion of his energy and intellectual engagement (not to mention his time) to this task of “accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). There are no shortcuts to genuine exposition. The expositor is not an explorer who returns to tell tales of the journey, but a guide who leads the people into the text and teaches the arts of the Bible study and interpretation even as he demonstrates the same.

Moreover, because the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God, the shape of the biblical text is also therefore divinely directed. God has spoken through the inspired human authors of Scripture, and each different genre of biblical literature demands that the preacher give careful attention to the text, allowing it to shape the message. Far too many preachers come to the text with a sermonic shape in mind and a limited set of tools in hand. To be sure, the shape of the sermon may differ from preacher to preacher and should differ from text to text. But genuine exposition demands that the text establish the shape as well as the substance of the sermon.

The preacher rises in the pulpit to accomplish one central purpose—to set forth the message and meaning of the biblical text. This requires historical investigation, literary discernment, and the faithful employment of the *analogia fidei* to interpret the Scripture by Scripture. It also requires the expositor to reject the modern conceit that what the text *meant* is not necessarily what it *means*. If the Bible is truly the enduring and eternal word of God, it means what it meant as it is newly applied in every generation.

Once the meaning of the text is set forth, the preacher moves to application. Application of biblical truth is a necessary task of expository preaching. But application must follow the diligent and disciplined task of explaining the text itself. T. H. L. Parker describes preaching like this: “Expository preaching consists in the explanation and application of a passage of Scripture. Without explanation it is not expository; without application it is not preaching.”

Application is absolutely necessary, but it is also fraught with danger. The first danger is the temptation to believe that the preacher can or should manipulate the human heart. The preacher is responsible for setting forth the eternal word of Scripture. Only the Holy Spirit can apply that word to human hearts or even open eyes to understand and receive the text.

Every sermon presents the hearer with a forced decision. We will either obey or disobey the word of God. The sovereign authority of God operates through the preaching of his word to

demand obedience from his people. Preaching is the essential instrumentality through which God shapes his people as the Holy Spirit accompanies the preaching of the word. As the Reformers remind us, it is through preaching that Christ is present among his people.

Tomorrow: Three characteristics of genuine expository preaching.

Expository Preaching and the Recovery of Christian Worship (Part Three)

Authentic expository preaching is marked by three distinct marks or characteristics: authority, reverence, and centrality. Expository preaching is authoritative because it stands upon the very authority of the Bible as the word of God. Such preaching requires and reinforces a sense of reverent expectation on the part of God's people. Finally, expository preaching demands the central place in Christian worship and is respected as the event through which the living God speaks to his people.

Thursday, August 11, 2005

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A keen analysis of our contemporary age comes from sociologist Richard Sennett of New York University. Sennett notes that in times past a major anxiety of most persons was loss of governing authority. Now, the tables have been turned, and modern persons are anxious about any authority over them: "We have come to fear the influence of authority as a threat to our liberties, in the family and in society at large." If previous generations feared the absence of authority, today we see "a fear of authority when it exists."

Some homileticians suggest that preachers should simply embrace this new worldview and surrender any claim to an authoritative message. Those who have lost confidence in the authority of the Bible as the word of God are left with little to say and no authority for their message. Fred Craddock, among the most influential figures in recent homiletic thought, famously describes today's preacher "as one without authority." His portrait of the preacher's predicament is haunting: "The old thunderbolts rust in the attic while the minister tries to lead his people through the morass of relativities and proximate possibilities." "No longer can the preacher

presuppose the general recognition of his authority as a clergyman, or the authority of his institution, or the authority of Scripture,” Craddock argues. Summarizing the predicament of the postmodern preacher, he relates that the preacher “seriously asks himself whether he should continue to serve up monologue in a dialogical world.”

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The obvious question to pose to Craddock’s analysis is this: If we have no authoritative message, why preach? Without authority, the preacher and the congregation are involved in a massive waste of precious time. The very idea that preaching can be transformed into a dialogue between the pulpit and the pew indicates the confusion of our era.

Contrasted to this is the note of authority found in all true expository preaching. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones notes: “Any study of church history, and particularly any study of the great periods of revival or reawakening, demonstrates above everything else just this one fact: that the Christian Church during all such periods has spoken with authority. The great characteristic of all revivals has been the authority of the preacher. There seemed to be something new, extra, and irresistible in what he declared on behalf of God.”

The preacher dares to speak on behalf of God. He stands in the pulpit as a steward “of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1) and declares the truth of God’s word, proclaims the power of that word, and applies the word to life. This is an admittedly audacious act. No one should even contemplate such an endeavor without absolute confidence in a divine call to preach and in the unblemished authority of the Scriptures.

In the final analysis, the ultimate authority for preaching is the authority of the Bible as the word of God. Without this authority, the preacher stands naked and silent before the congregation and the watching world. If the Bible is not the word of God, the preacher is involved in an act of self-delusion or professional pretension.

Standing on the authority of Scripture, the preaching declares a truth received, not a message invented. The teaching office is not an advisory role based in religious expertise, but a prophetic function whereby God speaks to his people.

Authentic expository preaching is also marked by reverence. The congregation that gathered before Ezra and the other preachers demonstrated a love and reverence for the word of God (Neh. 8). When the book was read, the people stood up. This act of standing reveals the heart of the people and their sense of expectancy as the word was read and preached.

Expository preaching requires an attitude of reverence on the part of the congregation. Preaching is not a dialogue, but it does involve at least two parties—the preacher and the congregation. The congregation’s role in the preaching event is to hear, receive, and obey the word of God. In so doing, the church demonstrates reverence for the preaching and teaching of the Bible and understands that the sermon brings the word of Christ near to the congregation. This is true worship.

Lacking reverence for the word of God, many congregations are caught in a frantic quest for significance in worship. Christians leave worship services asking each other, “Did you get anything out of that?” Churches produce surveys to measure expectations for worship. Would you like more music? What kind? How about drama? Is our preacher sufficiently creative?

Expository preaching demands a very different set of questions. Will I obey the word of God? How must my thinking be realigned by Scripture? How must I change my behavior to be fully obedient to the word? These questions reveal submission to the authority of God and reverence for the Bible as his word.

Likewise, the preacher must demonstrate his own reverence for God’s word by dealing truthfully and responsibly with the text. He must not be flippant for casual, much less dismissive or disrespectful. Of this we can be certain—no congregation will revere the Bible more than the preacher does.

If expository preaching is authoritative, and if it demands reverence, it must also be at the center of Christian worship. Worship properly directed to the honor and glory of God will find its center in the reading and preaching of the word of God. Expository preaching cannot be assigned a supporting role in the act of worship—it must be central.

In the course of the Reformation, Luther’s driving purpose was to restore preaching to its proper place in Christian worship. Referring to the incident between Mary and Martha in Luke 10, Luther reminded his congregation and students that Jesus Christ declared that “*only* one thing is necessary”—the preaching of the word (Luke 10:42). Therefore, “for Luther the most important reform needed in the worship of the Church of his day was to reestablish the centrality of the reading and preaching of the Word in public worship.”

That same reformation is needed in American evangelicalism today. Expository preaching must once again be central to the life of the church and central to Christian worship. In the end, the church will not be judged by its Lord for the quality of its music but for the faithfulness of its preaching.

When today’s evangelicals speak casually of the distinction between worship and preaching (meaning that the church will enjoy an offering of music before adding on a bit of preaching), they betray their misunderstanding of both worship and the act of preaching. Worship is not something we do before we settle down for the word of God; it is the act through which the people of God direct all their attentiveness to hearing the one true and living God speak to his people and receive their praises. God is most beautifully praised when his people hear his word, love his word, and obey his word.

As in the Reformation, the most important corrective to our corruption of worship (and defense against the consumerist demands of the day) is to return expository preaching and the public reading of God's word to their rightful primacy and centrality in worship. Only then will the "missing jewel" be truly rediscovered.