

Preaching with Authority: Three Characteristics of Expository Preaching

BY ALBERT MOHLER

Authentic expository preaching is marked by three distinct 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.

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."

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 preacher declares a truth received, not a message invented. The teaching office is not an advisory role based on 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 expectation 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 or 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, Luther’s central concern was to reform worship in the churches by re-establishing there the centrality of the reading and preaching of the word.

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 the one true and living God who speaks to them and receives 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 rightly return expository preaching and the public reading of God's word to primacy and centrality in worship. Only then will the "missing jewel" be truly rediscovered.