

In Defense of the Ass: Is the Sermon a "Relic of the Reformation"?

Part 1

By Michael Glodo

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Recently I was presented with a question about preaching. "Given that contemporary communication studies show that people learn better with a Q&A format, should we abandon the traditional form of the sermon?" The stated premise behind the question was that the sermon form as we know it is a "relic of the Reformation" for which there is no biblical sanction.

This is a great question because it puts to test the kinds of things I teach my students about preaching, challenging them to apply the biblical principles that underlie preaching to answer a contemporary question. And this is not a question entirely foreign to my thinking, having published on the subject of postmodernism and worship some twenty years ago and having taught preaching at the seminary level the majority of my ministry.¹

What's the reasoning behind such a question? I'm not directly aware of the specific communication studies which underlie the assertion, but there are plenty and I don't dispute the fact that some people learn better in an interactive format. However, it's a fallacy to assume that the primary purpose of preaching is teaching. In fact, the Bible indicates a relative distinction between the modes of teaching and preaching. Teaching has more of an instructional function, to impart information. By contrast, the mode of preaching is the work of an ambassador who is announcing something. My students will hear me say frequently "a worship service is not a school." That doesn't mean there isn't learning that takes place in preaching, but a herald of the kingdom announces a state of affairs for the purpose of persuading his listeners and eliciting faith in his good news. He does so as an Oracle of God, the very voice of the good Shepherd whose sheep hear his voice. (Jn 10; Rom 10:14, 16)

It is disconcerting to see the trend among both progressive and conservative evangelical churches alike to make worship sermon-centric. From week to week

¹ See my 'The Bible in Stereo: New Opportunities for Biblical Interpretation in an A-Rational Age', in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, ed. David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), pp. 148-72.

and before the service we often hear much about what the preacher will be saying as if that was the principal reason we go to church. Worship is much more than hearing a sermon. As Matthew Henry said to his listeners, "You should have come here to pray as much as to hear a sermon."² We need to speak of and make more of what the saints will say to the Lord. This perhaps will help remedy the increasing pastor-centeredness of many churches.

It's also a mistake to think that the sermon should assume the function of dialogue in worship. The whole worship service is to be dialogical - God speaking to his people through his Word and ordinances and his people speaking to him in prayer, song, Psalms and confessing the faith. So to suggest that God's ambassador should yield the floor so that the people can speak both overlooks the whole context of worship and presumes that God is fine with being interrupted when he is speaking.

But what about the decreasing attention spans of people? This is no doubt a cognitive pandemic, as Maggie Johnson and many others have so thoroughly and capably stated the matter.³ But surely we can offer better than a "be warm and be fed" for the culturally harassed and helpless. If the holy space and holy time of the Sabbath is to lift us out of the crush of life in a fallen world, it should help people unplug and help them revive the brain plasticity that the electronic golden calf has short-circuited.⁴

But if there is any doubt as to the effectiveness of the traditional sermon as a mode of communication one only needs to look to a study such as Thom Rainer's *Lessons the Unchurched* to see that the most prominent factor which keeps the seeker from coming back - according to a survey of the newly converted - is the preaching.

Additionally, the best preaching is dialogical. So that just as the Samaritan woman said of her encounter with Jesus, hearers of good preachers will say "he told me everything I ever did." The preacher is not omniscient like Jesus, but as a soul physician he is to be practiced in the art of arts and can give voice to the hopes, heartbreaks, doubts, fears and joys of the flock over which God has made him an undershepherd. And he makes the questions of his hearers better questions so that they can receive the best answers.

What about the claim that the sermon as we know it is not found in Scripture? Certainly sermons are mentioned in Scripture, but we have few (if any) sermons

² *A Way to Pray*, previously published as *Method for Prayer*

³ Maggie Jackson and Bill McKibben, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009)

⁴ There is a growing wave of cognition studies that show how 'partial attention deficit' has become pervasive through the use of new communication technologies, but also how the degradation of brain plasticity it has caused can be mitigated by pushing away from those technologies periodically and intentionally. See, for example, Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011)

as they were actually preached. We don't have a sufficient sampling of sermons from the apostolic era to say what the apostolic sermon form was. The closest we have is that apostolic proclamation in Acts which is, well, not dialogical Q&A. With the exception of 1 Corinthians 14, there is little evidence that the worship service involved Q&A. In fact what is clear from that passage is that persons schooled in the mystery religions where spontaneous ecstatic utterances prevailed were being disruptive to worship in the church.

What is clear from the post-apostolic era and every era since is that something very similar to the contemporary form of the sermon has existed throughout church history save for the darkest days prior to the Reformation when the Word of God had been functionally banished from worship, and when worship focused principally on half the communion sacrament unaccompanied by the Word. Outside that era the predominant form of preaching was the sermon more or less as we know it today. This is why Fant and Pinson's classic collection is entitled *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching* and not *Five Centuries of Great Preaching*.⁵

The "relic" assertion may have the appeal of simple biblicism - "there is no example in Scripture of the type of sermons we preach today" - but we have to recognize the potential hubris behind simplistic biblicism. While we must, like the reformers, always seek to reform the church according to Scripture, we must never think, speak or act as if we are the first generation to read Scripture. A proper use of historical theology is to ask humbly how the church before us has understood the Scriptures. Knowing our own fallenness and time-boundedness, we should never be content simply to find fault in the past, especially because of some newly-enlightened present. So we must be ready to discern between assertions that are sincerely trying to be biblical from those that are, well, arrogant.

We shouldn't think, though, that the form of the sermon has been fixed or that there is one absolute form. A learned study of the history of interpretation will reveal that the church's preaching has varied greatly within (and without) the common task of exposition.⁶ A discerning study of this pattern will reveal that 1) the pattern of preaching has correlated with cultural trends for the good and for the bad; 2) we today have much to learn from the church's past patterns of exposition — including the pre-Reformation era; 3) and the Reformation dramatically reclaimed and restored the centrality of Scripture to the life of the church. Protestants are inexorably and helplessly people of the Book, so we should expect sermons to be explanations of the Book.

⁵ Waco: Word Books, 1976

⁶ See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 2 vols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998-2010)

Such a positive assessment of the Reformation does not lead to uniformity. A survey of orthodox Reformed preaching today reveals enormous variety within what could be universally categorized as expository preaching.

We also need to realize that the "relic theory" is hopelessly Western. As the Next Christendom rises in the Global South, it's not doing so through Q&A but through bold preaching. If we were to consider being more global in our outlook on preaching, we would double and triple the length of our so-called "monologues."

To be continued...

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