

What We Should Expect from Preaching

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Reading Time: 6 minutes

Few things are as misunderstood as preaching. Some view preaching as the “main event” in the worship service each week. Others view preaching as the preacher’s attempt to keep the congregation awake for thirty to forty minutes. The truth is preaching is neither entertainment nor is it a spiritual pep-rally where the preacher tries his best to keep the congregation interested in the things of God. Biblical preaching is not boring preaching. However, many people today often listen to preaching expecting things the Bible never promises to deliver. Others have their expectations too low when it comes to preaching: they are content to hear a few stories, several jokes, and very little if any Scripture expounded at all. God chose to communicate His will through preaching (1 Cor. 1:21; Titus 1:3). Preaching is important to God and therefore it should be important to us. Those who preach will be held to a high account by God and should be sure they remember to do what pleases God (James 3:1). What should we expect from preaching? Let us be sure our expectations are God-centered and not man-made (1 Thess. 2:13).

Expect to Hear the Truth

Preaching is supposed to communicate the truth of God's Word (John 17:17). Paul told Timothy to preach the Word which contained the truth from God (2 Tim. 4:2). Many times we focus on style and personal preference, which are not bad in and of themselves, and we forget to consider whether we heard the truth or not. When someone stands up to preach, those who are listening should be following along in their own Bibles and being sure that what is being said aligns with the Scriptures (1 Thess. 5:21-22; 1 John 4:1). This does not simply mean that the preacher's words are found in the Bible. A man may quote Scripture and reference passages and still not preach the truth (Matt. 4:5-7). This does not mean every preacher should be held in suspicion and that we should not give anyone the benefit of the doubt, but it does mean we should be discerning as listeners. That being said, we should expect to hear the Bible quoted and expounded. Preaching cannot be true if it is devoid of Scripture. I realize there is no "divine quota" of verses used in a sermon to make it scriptural, but we should not try to see how little of the Bible we can preach. It is impressive to read Peter's sermon in Acts 2 (the first gospel sermon) and notice that more than half of his words are direct quotations from the Old Testament.

The most important question at the end of the sermon is not, "Did I like what the preacher said?" or "Was he funny or interesting?" The most important question is did he share the truth of God's Word? The truth is not always pleasant initially, but it must always be spoken. Jesus promised that continuing in the truth of his word would make men free (John 8:31-32). Truth must not be made to mean hearing what we have always heard the way we have always heard it said. Truth is the entirety of God's Word taught clearly even when it involves things we have not been taught before or things we have neglected (Acts 20:26-27). The truth must be spoken in love so that it can build up those who hear it (Eph. 4:15). We must not use truth as a cloak for our rude or un-Christlike behavior (2 Tim. 2:24-26). People should not leave the sermon wondering what the preacher believes. Regardless of the subject of the sermon, those listening should expect to hear the truth from God's Word proclaimed.

Expect to Be Encouraged

Preaching will not always make people feel good, but neither should it always make people feel bad. Paul did say that preaching should exhort and exhortation involves encouragement (2 Tim. 4:2). Those who hear a steady diet of all that they are doing wrong and a God who cannot be pleased will soon become hardened legalists or possibly give up altogether (cf. Matt. 23:15). A preacher is not soft or unsound because he encourages. A preacher is unsound if he never encourages; the key is to be biblically balanced.

The gospel is good news and we must not forget that. We should not comfort those in sin or

make those who are lost feel as if they are saved. Still, those who are saved must not leave the assembly thinking that they are lost. Biblical encouragement is not to be equated with the “health and wealth” gospel or a mere “feel good message.” Preaching that encourages its listeners is preaching that reminds listeners of all that God has done for us in Christ, God’s longsuffering, and God’s awareness of our efforts to walk in the light. Christians are supposed to encourage each other daily, and this must not be forgotten in preaching (Heb. 3:13).

Expect to Be Challenged and Corrected

Every preacher has heard the famous post-sermon remark, “You stepped on my toes.” This statement is often meant to say the sermon applied directly to the individual who heard in a specific sense. We should expect to be challenged in Christianity. Jesus challenged those who heard Him to take up their cross daily (Luke 9:23). Maybe preaching today is not demanding too much from Christians but rather not enough. While encouragement is necessary, we must not expect to be coddled and told that we are doing everything right (Psa. 141:5). We should expect deep preaching that helps hearers graduate to the meat of the Word and not the same elementary things that leave congregations on the milk (Heb. 5:11-14). First principle lessons are good and can be preached in a deep and engaging way, but we need to be sure to go on to spiritual maturity (Heb. 6:1).

If we hate correction, we will not make it far in any area of life, and this is true in Christianity as well (Prov. 15:10). Timothy was to “reprove and rebuke” with all the patience he could must be correction had to be given (2 Tim. 4:2). Those who do not want the preacher to preach on social drinking, immodest apparel, jesting, covetousness, racism, prejudice, abortion, or any other topic that offends them misunderstand preaching. False teachers are often popular because they tell people what they want to hear or they avoid saying things that people need to hear (Gal. 4:16; 2 Tim. 4:3-4). King Ahab hated Micaiah (the Lord’s prophet) because Micaiah did not tell him what he wanted to hear (1 Kings 22:8). Ahab, like many today, did not understand that preachers do not originate the truth; they simply echo the truth God has given (1 Kings 22:18). Preaching should correct us where we are wrong, and we should welcome it as we desire to be the people God would have us to be. The preacher should be correcting himself too as he preaches, knowing that he is not above sin or weakness (1 John 1:8,10). Let’s not water down preaching to the point that we are afraid to call out sin for what it is because we do not want to offend anyone. God intends for preaching to be challenging so that it can get to the heart of the listeners where His Word can produce the necessary change (Acts 2:36-37).

Expect to Hear Christ Magnified

You cannot read the sermons recorded in the book of Acts and find sermons that fail to exalt Jesus. Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection are the focus of the messages proclaimed by the apostles and preachers throughout the first century church. Paul's main goal in preaching was "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:3). Preaching should point people to Jesus. This does not mean one cannot preach from the Old Testament, but remember the Old Testament properly handled gets people to Jesus (Luke 24:44). Those who listen to sermons should leave hearing more about Jesus than about sports teams, politics, the latest controversy in the news, or the preacher's favorite movie (2 Cor. 4:5). Preaching that is done without Jesus being the focus is not true biblical preaching. Preaching that is simply "do more and try harder" without little to no focus on Jesus' finished work on the cross misses the heart of the New Testament. We should expect to hear a preacher lift Christ up and point people to Him (John 12:32). Christ must not merely be mentioned or tagged on to the end of the sermon for invitation purposes but instead He should be the central theme in the message preached because He is the central theme of the entire Bible (John 5:39-40). Expect to hear Christ magnified, and hold those who preach to you accountable for doing so.

Preaching changed the world in the first century and it still does the same thing today. We sometimes are disappointed with preaching because we want the wrong things from it. We must not desire to have our ears tickled but instead have our hearts stirred. Preaching is God's weapon of choice in getting the gospel into people's hearts. Let us expect nothing more and nothing less than God does.