

Pillar II

Faithfully Proclaim the Word of God

The health of the church depends upon the faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word. It is, after all, from the Bible that we learn who God is and how He accomplished redemption for sinners through the sacrificial death of His Son. It is by the proclamation of the Word of God that sinners come to faith in Christ (Rom 10:9-17). From the Bible we learn what worship, fellowship, evangelism, ministry, and stewardship ought to be. From the Bible we learn how to properly love one another, resolve conflict, and provide accountability for the sake of Christ-likeness. The church would not exist if not for God's Word.

This affirmation flows from the Protestant conviction that the Word of God creates the church and not the other way around. Perhaps you have always assumed that to be true, not knowing that the official position of the Church of Rome is that the church created the Bible. This error places the hierarchy, traditions, and dogmas of the church at the center of the church rather than the Word of God. To assert that the Word of God is at the center of the church is not to deny that Christ is the Head of the Church but rather that the primary means by which Christ rules His church is through His Word. I once heard John MacArthur comment that the trend away from biblically faithful preaching is in reality an attempt to overthrow the Head of the church by removing the Word of the Head of the church from the church.

Donald MacNair calls a commitment to the Bible the hallmark of a healthy church. He writes, "When I speak of the Bible as the hallmark of the healthy church, I mean that a church's defining characteristic should always be the faithful use of the Bible, God's holy and inerrant Word...To use the Bible faithfully in ministry, we must enunciate its truths. We must be convinced of its authoritative relevance to any situation. And we must spell out its implications for daily living and for the new problems that we constantly face."¹

There have always been voices from within the church that claim preaching is not relevant. We certainly hear those voices in our own day. The use of videos, drama, meditation, prayer labyrinths, and many other sensory experiences crowd out time that should be given over to the preaching of Scripture. The result is a potentially dangerous elevation of subjective experience over the guidance of God's revelation through His written word.

God has always called His people to be an auditory lot. God is into words. As much as sensory experiences may excite us, God has always been committed to forming a people from the power of His words. This is reflected in the act of creation described in Genesis. Pagan religions depicted creation as coming about through such highly

¹ MacNair, Donald, *The Practices of a Healthy Church* (P&R: Phillipsburg, PA, 1999) p. 64.

experiential means as wars between the gods or even sex acts. But God created all there is through the power of His word (Gen 1).

God originally spoke to His people directly. As a result of sin God's people needed mediation to hear from God so He spoke to them through His laws and the prophets. Next, God spoke in the most profound way through His Son (Heb 1:1-2).

Jesus Christ is referred to as "the Word" in the first chapter of John's Gospel. Since the time of the apostles God speaks to His people through Jesus as He is revealed in the Bible, His completed Word. This is also how God chooses to create new life in those dead in their sins (Rom 10). Christians must never despise the importance of God's Word faithfully proclaimed. The preaching and teaching of the Bible must never lose its place of prominence in the church. Our very life depends upon it.

Metro East desires to be a church known for faithfully preaching and teaching the Word of God. Fads will come and go and the prophets of church growth will search feverishly for ways to make the church more "relevant." Scripture never promises that the words of God and the Gospel will be popular. Indeed we are promised that preaching and the message of the cross itself are foolishness to the world (I Cor 1:18-25).

The preaching at Metro East can be broadly classified under two headings: 1) Sermon series' covering specific books of the Bible and 2) Sermons and series of sermons that address specific doctrinal topics. In both cases the sermons are expositional or expository.

Expositional preaching focuses squarely on the biblical text. It is preaching that takes the main point of the text and makes it the main point of the sermon. An expositional sermon is one that strives to say what the text is saying; no more, no less. Mark Dever writes, "Expositional preaching is preaching in service to the Word. It presumes belief in the authority of Scripture – that the Bible is actually God's Word; but it is something much more than that. A commitment to expositional preaching is a commitment to *hear* God's Word – not just to affirm that it is God's Word but to actually submit yourself to it"²

Why Metro East is committed to biblical exposition:

- *Biblical exposition is the means by which God produces faith in the hearts of sinners.*

This sounds strange and unnecessarily narrow in a day when the church places such high priority on subjective experience and popular Christian books promise to help us hear from God in new and exciting ways. But the Bible is clear that the lost will not believe "without someone preaching" to them (Rom 10:14). What is more, faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). "But doesn't God speak through beautiful music or majestic mountains?" Well, yes and no. Creation can testify only to God as the Mighty Creator (Rom 1). On the other hand, our knowledge of God's redemptive work through the cross of Christ is entirely dependent upon what He

² Dever, Mark, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway: Wheaton, IL, 2000) p. 27.

reveals in His Word. No one will deduce from seeing a mountain that they are sinners hopelessly alienated from God and therefore must trust entirely in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. This knowledge comes from the Holy Spirit as He illumines the inspired Word of God.

The power of the preached Word of God is illustrated through the prophet Ezekiel. God gives the prophet a vision of a valley full of the carcasses of a vast number of people. All that is left is dry bones. After viewing the bones God asks Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” God then commands the prophet to “prophesy” or preach to the mass of bones.

Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord (37:1-6).

This vision signifies God’s power to create spiritual life through the proclaiming of His Word. In his vision, Ezekiel preaches as the Lord commands him and the results are astonishing.

I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.”” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army (37:7-10).

Next, God interprets the vision for Ezekiel. God tells the prophet that the bones represent the people of Israel. God’s promise to His people, “I will put My Spirit in you and you will live” (37:14) is illustrated by the vision of the valley of dry bones. And how will God breathe new life into His dead people? It will happen through His Word. There is nothing inherently powerful in the act of proclaiming God’s Word. The power to create new life belongs to God alone. The proclamation of the Word is merely the means that the Sovereign Lord has chosen to use. God commands Ezekiel to speak His Word to His people while they are dead, and as he obeys, those once dead come to life. To this day the Spirit of God uses “that Word above all earthly powers” to bring the dead to life. “I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek 36:26).

- *Biblical exposition ensures that God’s people will hear what God says.*

Expositional preaching possesses God’s authority. The only way a preacher will say what God says is when he stands firmly behind the Bible and expounds on what is there. The word “exposition” means to “expose”. Biblical exposition then is exposing God’s Word. It is saying what the Bible says and, therefore, what God says.

- *Biblical exposition is a means by which God sanctifies His people.*

Sanctification is the work of God to make His people holy. He promises to do this (Rom 8:29; I Cor 6:11; Phil 1:6; Heb 13:12). And like so many of the things God does He sanctifies His people through the use of means. Certainly, God uses such means as fellowship with other believers to make us more like Christ (Heb 10:24-25). He even uses suffering for this purpose (Rom 5:3; James 1:3; I Pet 5:10). But God's primary means to sanctify His people is His Word. Jesus prayed to His Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). Jesus warded off the attacks of Satan by quoting God's Word. "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4). The Psalmist wrote, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word...I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (119:9, 11). Paul tells us that "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word..." (Eph 5:25-26).

- *Biblical exposition teaches proper biblical interpretation.*

So many theological errors today are the results of poor skill of biblical interpretation. Expository preaching and teaching is a means not only to teach the content of the Bible but how to interpret it properly. Some of the best lessons we learn come by watching someone skilled perform a particular task or discipline. A church that preaches and teaches the Bible well will produce men and women who know how to read and understand the Bible for themselves.

- *Biblical exposition protects the church from error.*

It is always tempting for the preacher to tell people what they want to hear. Popularity has its advantages. Because of this, preaching is often more a reflection of popular fads than it is an exposition of Scripture. In his penetrating critique of the church growth movement Os Guinness writes,

The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into a marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our church culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection.

The ironic lack of clear biblical exposition in "conservative, Bible believing" churches has led to a tragic fulfillment of what the apostle Paul warned: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (II Tim 4:3-4).

Faithful exposition of the Scriptures from pulpit, in small groups, and at home is the only safeguard against an otherwise inevitable drift toward error. In his tender farewell to the Ephesian elders Paul told them, "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:26). The Bible is being all but completely ignored from the pulpits and classrooms of too many churches. There is a famine of Scripture among

God's people which leaves them highly susceptible to error. Those entrusted with the duties of preaching and teaching must possess an unshakable commitment to biblical exposition "so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph 4:14).

- *Biblical exposition guards the preacher and his hearers from his own personal agendas.*

A tendency that the preacher must guard against is to say what he wants to say rather than to limit his sermon to what the Word warrants. Topical preaching lends itself easily to the practice of cherry picking Scripture passages out of context to serve as proof texts for what the preacher wanted to say all along. This is not faithful exposition and therefore is not faithful preaching.