

THE PERSISTENCE OF PREACHING: WHY CHRISTIAN PREACHING REMAINS RESILIENT WITHIN THE CHURCH TODAY.

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Despite the occasional announcement of its demise, the practice of preaching has been surprisingly resilient. Preliminary research showing the ubiquity and centrality of preaching within the most prominent and fastest growing North American churches is supported by a brief historical, biblical, theological, and practical study of the persistence of preaching across time.

Preaching is surprisingly persistent. Despite the occasional pronouncement of some social commentator predicting its demise, preaching never seems to get the message that it was supposed to die. In fact, it could be said that preaching has never been more central to the practice of growing and flourishing churches in North America today.

This was unexpected. “We are all aware than in countless courts of opinion the verdict on preaching has been rendered and the sentence passed,” said Fred Craddock, not too many decades ago.¹ The surprise is that many of these critics were found within the church itself. “It is the sober opinion of many concerned Christians, some who give the sermon and some who hear it,” Craddock wrote, “that preaching is an anachronism.” The church cannot afford to live on “the thin diet of fond memories,” he suggested.²

Craddock was not the only homiletician of his time to suggest there was a problem. “The prophets of doom in today’s Church are confidently predicting that the day of preaching is over,” said John Stott. “It is a dying art, they say, an outmoded form of communication, ‘an echo from an abandoned past.’”³

Stott detailed the many reasons for such pessimism, citing a growing anti-authoritarianism, the influence of television and other forms of “cybernetic” media, and the church’s loss of confidence in the gospel. “The anti-authoritarian mood makes people unwilling to listen, addiction of television makes them unable to do

¹ “The alarm felt by those of us still preaching is not a response solely to the noise outside on the street, where public disfavor and ridicule have been heaped upon the pulpit. . . it may be simply that these critics have heard us preach!” Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, Revised., (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 3.

² *Ibid*, 4.

³ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, (Grand Rapids: MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1982), 50.

so, and the contemporary atmosphere of doubt makes many preachers both unwilling and unable to speak.”⁴

Craddock and Stott were both quick to describe their personal confidence in biblical preaching, notwithstanding the less confident mood of their times. “So completely have these problems undermined the morale of some preachers that they have given up altogether,” Stott wrote, following quickly with his own resolve to “argue theologically for the indispensable and permanent place of preaching in the purpose of God for his Church.”⁵

In a similar vein and at the same period of time, Ian Pitt-Watson described the possibility some believed that other functions of ministry, both pastoral and liturgical, may have been undervalued, relative to the historical exaltation of preaching in the church. “But whatever the future may hold in that regard, the present is full of promise for the preacher.”⁶

Pitt-Watson was correct. Fast forward thirty years and the practice of preaching continues to hold supremacy in the life of the church.

The Priority of Preaching in Churches that Flourish

That preaching continues to hold an abiding, even dominant position in the fastest growing churches today is supported by preliminary research. As measured by Lifeway Research and published in *Outreach* magazine, 100 percent of the top 25 largest American churches feature preaching as the focal point of their Sunday morning worship and ministry.⁷ At the time of this writing, the most recent sermons posted prominently on the websites of each of these churches ranged in length from 23 to 50 minutes in length, with an average running time of 37 minutes. Each of these sermons was founded or at least related to a biblical passage or set of passages.⁸ It should be noted that these sermons were all delivered by a single preacher in monological form from an elevated platform. The smallest of these congregations

⁴ Ibid, 89.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Primer for Preachers*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986), 17.

⁷ *Outreach* Largest Participating Churches 2017: The *Outreach* Magazine and *Lifeway Research* Annual Report. <http://outreachmagazine.com/outreach-100-largest-churches-2017.html?pag=1>

⁸ While it is true that each of these preachers would claim that their preaching was “biblical,” not every sermon was rooted in serious biblical exegesis. Many of these sermons could be described as “topical” in nature, while still fitting a broad, historical description of Christian preaching.

numbered 12,000 people with many of these sermons being broadcast to multiple sites.⁹

Ranking	Church	Size	Sermon Length
1	Church of the Highlands	40,571	45 minutes
2	North Point Ministries	38,014	40 minutes
3	Gateway Church	30,420	30-40 minutes
4	Crossroads Church	28,386	40 minutes
5	Christ's Church of the Valley	27,146	32-35 minutes
6	Saddleback Church	26,479	35-45 minutes
7	Christ Fellowship	26,200	23-37 minutes
8	Willow Creek Community Church	25,343	30 minutes
9	Elevation Church	25,130	45 minutes
10	Southeast Christian Church	24,779	33 minutes
11	Eagle Brook Church	22,480	35 minutes
12	Second Baptist Church	20,908	32-50 minutes
13	Mt. Zion Baptist Church,	18,000	49 minutes
14	Flatirons Community Church	17,176	45 minutes
15	Mariners Church	16,785	35 minutes
16	Bayside Church	16,460	39 minutes
17	12Stone Church	16,000	45 minutes
18	LCBC Church	15,376	38 minutes
19	Family Christian Center	15,355	45 minutes
20	The Rock Church	14,151	47 minutes
21	New Life Church	14,028	33-40 minutes
22	Community Bible Church	13,154	35-37 minutes
23	Celebration Church	12,381	35-50 minutes
24	Lutheran Church of Hope	12,047	40 minutes

⁹ While these churches are all US-based, anecdotal evidence suggests a similar situation in Canada, albeit on a much smaller scale. A quick survey of four of the largest and most prominent churches in the city of Vancouver, BC, for example, show an average attendance of between three and five thousand and an average sermon length of 45 minutes for their most recently preached sermons.

25	Valley Bible Fellowship	12,038	40 minutes
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While sermon length is not the only factor contributing to the scale and health of these churches, it is difficult to dispute that prominent, lengthy, and broadly biblical preaching is common to each. This is not to attempt to pose a correlation between this kind of preaching and church growth. Many and perhaps most churches of stagnating and diminishing attendance would also feature preaching that fits this description. The point, then, is not to attest to a positive effect on church quality or individual spiritual formation by churches that continue to preach. It is rather, to suggest that preaching does not appear to hinder church growth. On the contrary, it continues as a consistent feature of the most prominent and attractive churches.¹⁰

It could also be questioned as to whether this represents a last gasp effort made by churches whose cultural relevance might be diminishing. While that specific question is beyond the scope of this paper, it can be observed that the size of these churches is not insignificant. The scale of these ministries cannot be overlooked nor can it be suggested that they lack influence within their respective communities.

To further attest the point, one might consider the significant place of preaching in religious podcasting. The most recent “Top 40 US Religion and Spirituality Podcasts” at the time of this writing on the iTunes Charts, features 12 podcasts entirely devoted to Christian preaching, including the number one, two, and four positions.¹¹ That the preaching of people like Stephen Furtick, Timothy Keller, Tony Evans, and Francis Chan is prominently placed amid the myriad voices related to marriage, leadership, mindfulness, and everything else that passes as

¹⁰ Contemporary concern about the demise of preaching has been muted. Most of the concerns expressed in the homiletic literature today are more concerned about the quality of the preaching that happens in the church today. Gospel Coalition council member, Sam Storms, could be taken as an example: “Biblical preaching has fallen on hard times in the western world. There’s certainly no lack of speaking and sharing and shouting. And dramatic presentations and video clips are prevalent in pulpits across America. But there is precious little biblical preaching. The Bible makes a token appearance here and there, but rarely to be explained and expounded and acknowledged as authoritative for how we think and live.” Sam Storms, “10 Things You Should Know About the Demise of Expository Preaching.” In Sam Storms Enjoying God, June 19, 2017. Access: <https://www.samstorms.com/enjoying-god-blog/post/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-demise-of-expository-preaching>.

¹¹Top 40 US Religion & Spirituality Podcasts <http://www.itunescharts.net/us/charts/podcasts/religion-spirituality/>

spiritual in the world today is striking. The very least that can be said is that the death of preaching in North America has been greatly exaggerated.¹²

While the scale of these churches may be larger than those in previous periods, the prominence of preaching within churches like these has been consistent across time. Edwin C. Dargan in his seminal history of preaching wrote that, “Since Christianity became an active force in human affairs there has been upward and onward movement, and one mighty factor in that progress has been preaching.”¹³ Dargan then details the way that preaching has served across history to shape and influence “the life and progress of nations” as it has related to the “morals and customs of mankind,” the arts and sciences, philosophy, the natural sciences, literature, education, and of course, “the religious life and progress of mankind.”¹⁴

Even when viewed from a negative perspective, Dargan claims that “[d]ecline of spiritual life and activity in the churches is commonly accompanied by a lifeless, formal, unfruitful preaching, and this partly as cause, partly as effect.”¹⁵ Others would support this view. John A. Broadus, the father of modern homiletics, wrote that “[t]he record of Christian history has been that the strength of the church is directly related to the strength of the pulpit. When the message from the pulpit has been uncertain and faltering, the church has been weak; when the pulpit has given a positive, declarative message, the church has been strong.”¹⁶ P.T. Forsyth began his Beecham Lectures at Yale University by saying, “It is, perhaps, an overbold beginning, but I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stand and falls.”¹⁷

There was a period in recent history when “emerging” expressions of church life threatened to unseat preaching, at least as it has been commonly understood.

¹² This paper is focused mostly on the North American experience, which is still leans heavily upon the preaching of white males, particularly among the larger and more prominent ministries. It should be noted, however, that this paper is not dismissing the preaching of women wherever it might be found. That said, it would be useful to find means to widen the scope of this study to reflect a more global and inclusive perspective.

¹³ Edwin C. Dargan, A History of Preaching, Volume I, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 8.

¹⁴ “Even the most superficial study reveals the connection, at once causal and resultant, between movements of the kind described and preaching.” Ibid, 13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ John A. Broadus, On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons. Fourth Edition, Revised by Vernon L. Stanfield. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1870), 7.

¹⁷ Cited in Graeme Goldsworthy, Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 31.

Doug Pagitt, a leader in the Emergent Village movement re-imagined preaching as a communal function of the church. His proposal for “progressional dialogue” attempted to move preaching beyond “speaching” toward a more socialized, formative practice in community.¹⁸ But while Pagitt and others created a stir in the homiletic community, his influence was short-lived. As has been shown, the preaching featured in most churches today is substantively similar to that of previous ages. There may not be a pulpit anymore and the dress might be more casual, but preachers are still shaping communities through determined, biblical monologue.

Preaching is persistent. The question one might ask is why.

The Practical Usefulness of Platform Preaching

The prominence of preaching makes a certain sense when one considers dominant forms of communication in the 21st century. While much has been made about narrative media and the influence of television and motion pictures, this has not come at the expense of speech-making. The election and on-going popularity of Barack Obama has been attributed to the power of his oratory, perhaps more than due to the effect of his policies.¹⁹ Stand-up comedy remains one of the most popular and enduring forms of public address.²⁰ TED Talks have become a cultural phenomenon as people stand on platforms before large and enthusiastic crowds to deliver incisive thinking from their respective fields of expertise.²¹ Podcasting has become a popular media for presenting monologue (a fact not lost on contemporary preachers). These forms of secularized preaching prove the ongoing power and validity of the form.

There is an efficiency to preaching. Preaching allows a communicator to prepare an intellectual meal for a large group of people through a single function and event. The technologies of the day allow for amplification of that investment to a greater degree than ever before. Having an entire congregation partake of that same

¹⁸ Doug Pagitt, Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 23-25.

¹⁹ Hendrick Hertzberg, “The Obama Effect” in The New Yorker, June 22, 2009. Access: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/22/the-obama-effect>

²⁰ Mary O’Hara, “How Comedy Makes Us Better People” in BBC: Future. Access: <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20160829-how-laughter-makes-us-better-people>

²¹ Tim Bajarin, “Why TED Matters,” in Time, March 24, 2014. Access: <http://time.com/34784/why-ted-matters/>

meal at the same time allows for a unity of experience that can keep a community focused in the same direction and on the same things.

The human element of the preaching event is often underestimated. While preaching can often be dull and uninteresting, when practiced well there is a connection made between the preacher and the audience that is seldom matched elsewhere. A bond is established on a human level, beyond what is possible through other communication media, precisely because of the absence of much in the way of such media. The vulnerability that is felt by the preacher is experienced by the listener and that connection can be powerful even if the two might never have a direct relationship. This reality is confirmed by the apostle Paul himself, who said to the Romans, “I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – that is that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Romans 1:11-12 ESV).

It is significant that preaching is an oral enterprise. Long before Gutenberg, the church was able to sustain itself through the oral communication of its truth claims, something that is easily forgotten. Soren Kierkegaard said that, “According to our way of thinking you would think the Lord would at least have put off being born until after the invention of printing, that until then there had been no fullness of time, and that he would have secured for himself a few high-speed presses.”²² The fact that we have such presses today, does not make less effective the original power of orality.

The event nature of preaching is in itself effective. Preachers themselves often under-estimate the impact of a gathered congregation sharing an experience in the presence of God. It is easy to think of the task as the dissemination of a body of knowledge. One can forget the power made possible by a shared event in God’s presence. The best preaching moves from instruction to conviction.²³ It is an experience of God more than it is an education about God.²⁴ Such an experience needs to be shared communally.

²² Soren Kierkegaard, cited in Dave McClellan, Preaching by Ear: Speaking God’s Truth From the Inside Out, (Wooster, OH: Weaver, 2014), 55.

²³ Kenton C. Anderson, Integrative Preaching: A Comprehensive Model for Transformational Proclamation, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 68.

²⁴ Paul Scott Wilson, The Practice of Preaching, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 20.

Preaching persists because it is useful to the purposes of the church. No other means has been found more effective in the unifying of a congregation around a vision and a sense of mission. Preaching is practiced because it works.

The Theological Imperative of Preaching

Beyond pragmatics, however, the most powerful reason for the persistence of preaching is that it arises from the example of Jesus and the Word of God itself. In the early days of Jesus' Galilean ministry, he set aside the comfort of his home town in order to preach to the neighboring towns. "Let us go on to the next towns," he said, "that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out (Mark 1:38 ESV)."

Peter reminded his congregation that it they "had been born anew, through the living and abiding word of God." "This word," he explained, "is the good news which was preached to you (1 Peter 1:23,25 ESV)."

Paul, having expressed to the Romans that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," reminds them further that no one will receive that good news unless someone tells them. "How will they hear without a preacher (Romans 10:13-15 ESV)?"

In light of the fact that we stand accountable in God's presence, Paul reminds Timothy to "Preach the Word." He calls him to "be ready in season and out of season," knowing that it would not always be convenient to preach (2 Timothy 4:1,2). Preachers of every age and era have realized the challenge embedded in this aspect of their calling. Preaching is not always in season, but that does not mean that we will not persist.

The church has, in fact, persisted in this calling and when we preach today we are acting congruently with both the historic practice and the purpose of the church. Phillips Brooks said that when we preach the gospel, "it puts us into right relations with all historic Christianity. The message never can be told as if we were the first to tell it."²⁵ When we preach, we are fulfilling the purpose of the church as it has always been and as it always will be. The church is in the business of expressing the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, and nothing expresses it as well as the persistent preaching of the gospel.

²⁵ Phillips Brooks, On Preaching, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1964), 18. Originally published in 1877.

It is this eschatological sense that offers preaching its ‘end’ – its ultimate purpose. Preaching brings the Kingdom into being and so long as that purpose is not completely fulfilled, preaching must persist. John Koessler writes that, “When we preach, we announce the incursion of Christ’s kingdom into the dark places of the world. We declare that Jesus Christ has come and is coming again... With mere words as its primary weapon, preaching topples the kingdom of death and unseats the dominion of darkness.”²⁶

The truth that this implies is that preaching will not always be necessary once it has achieved its end. “Yet unlike the word of the Lord, which lasts forever, preaching will one day end. The day is drawing near when the church will no longer need its prophets, pastors, and teachers (1 Cor, 13:10; Eph. 4:11-13).”²⁷ There is a sense in which preachers must work themselves out of their job. Yet until the Kingdom comes in fullness, that job is not complete.

Preaching is Stubborn

Preaching is counter-cultural. It should not be surprising if Christian preaching were marginalized or even defeated given the strength of the culture’s commitment to vain and self-serving ideologies. 2 Timothy 4:3,4 reminds us that, “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 will wander off into myths.” Jesus noted in Luke 8:4-7 that preaching will often fall upon rocky and unproductive soil.

The Bible also says that the Word of God is a sharp and double-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12) and that it always achieves its purpose whenever it is offered (Isaiah 55:11).

Christian preaching, like the Word that it offers, is a hardy plant that continues to exist in the most unlikely places. This resilience is testimony to God himself who continues to confound the wise by the persistent foolishness of this preaching (1 Corinthians 1:18-19).

²⁶ John Koessler, *Folly, Grace, and Power: The Mysterious Act of Preaching*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Preachers are stubborn and so is the Word that preaching offers. It will not be dissuaded from its purpose. It will always have its place within the church and world that needs to hear it.

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