

# THE ROLE OF PREACHING IN THE CHURCH OF TOMORROW

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Great preachers, like the buffalo, are becoming more and more difficult to find. Their era is past, and yet a great many people cry out for a great preacher to fill their pulpit. Seminary trustees keep hoping their school will find the formula which will once again produce great pulpit figures. Pulpit committees looking for those great preachers wring their hands in despair. But great preaching belongs to another time and most of these hopes are in vain.

I would like briefly to take a look at the reasons why preaching is under such heavy fire, and what is taking its place in the church. Both of these matters have implications for the training of the professional ministry, and I will suggest some of these implications as I see them.

Preaching, as it has historically been practiced in the Protestant tradition is both authoritarian and built upon a dependence model.

Preaching is authoritarian in the sense that authority is focused in one man or woman. That individual does the thinking, reading, studying and experiencing for a large group of people, then processes that thinking, reading, etc. through his personality for the benefit of the gathered congregation on Sunday morning. Consequently, it is the minister who learns most, grows most, and benefits most from the sermon.

Preaching is also a dependence structure. The congregation is basically passive, dependent upon the person in the pulpit for guidance and insight. The person in the pew rarely is given any opportunity to speak up or to voice his response or opinion. He *depends* upon the clergyman as a guide or father, which leaves him in a basically dependent role.

We are emerging from a period in history when most people were relatively uneducated in comparison to the minister. He had more education, more insight, more books, and a claim to special revelation beyond that. There was more need for strong authority to interpret a world of mystery, and the clergyman supplied that need along with the teacher, the professor, the doctor and a few others. But the average church member today is better educated, and has access to adult education, travel, and constant education through the variety of mass communication media at his disposal.

In fact, there is a new man and a new culture emerging today. This has helped to make preaching, *as we have known it in the past*, an

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anachronism for a great many people. They are showing us with their feet that they are not interested in sitting passively to listen week after week while someone else assumes an authoritarian leadership stance over them.

This new man is non-authoritarian, and is therefore not interested in authoritarian structures of any kind. In fact, he rebels against authoritarian leadership, *even in the military* where it has been historically entrenched. Word came this morning of two American battalions who refused orders to move into enemy territory as a revolt against their leadership. The new man is a dialogical man and a participative man, and the culture he is creating is a culture which does not accept leaders who cannot listen to their followers. This new man insists that he has a right to speak and be heard. The leader who will not listen to him does not earn the right to be heard by him. So the new man seeks out those social structures which honor his right to dialogue. He is not interested in being a passive listener. He assumes the right to express himself and to have his contribution honored.

The new man is more than dialogical; he is participative. He insists on the right to help shape the structures and institutions which influence his life. He not only wants to speak and be heard, he wants to participate in the decision-making process. This makes him even more unhappy with the traditional preaching structure in which he has nothing to say and which he feels powerless to influence.

The new man is also one who seeks inter-dependence. He wants to relate to authority figures who can be open to mutual influence. This means moving from dependence structures, where he is treated as a child, to interdependence structures where both he and the authority figure bring their respective gifts and honor *each other*. In this type of social arrangement, research has shown us, creativity is freed and groups tend to be most productive and mature in their decisions.

So we have the strange phenomenon of the "empty pulpit." The laymen feels an emptiness from the pulpit, and cries out for a great preacher who will really get through to him. The preacher senses the lack of communication and feels empty in his efforts to communicate with the layman.

At the same time, we have the counter-phenomenon of some very large churches gathered around a charismatic figure who seems to draw large numbers to sit happily in dependence upon his preaching. I suspect we will see this for a time, as there are still many persons who, in their insecurity, seek a strong father-figure who has all the answers for them. This will pass in time for several reasons. First, not many preachers can pull it off. Too many of them are honest with themselves and cannot pose as the all-knowing one. Their integrity

does not permit this god-like stance. Secondly, people are maturing and becoming less willing to yield up their authority to any one leader. And thirdly, it is my theory that hostility builds up in authoritarian structures as people accept an anonymous, child-like position. (This theory is supported by some group research.) The build-up of hostility in authoritarian structures tends to cause disintegration in the long run. So I do not see this as a viable option for the new man and the newly emerging culture, though it is seductively tempting at the present time.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

If this assessment of the present situation in preaching and of the culture is reasonably accurate, then there are some clear implications for the future of the church and the training of its leadership.

This is how I see the role of the minister in the church of the future (which is day after tomorrow in some places and yesterday in some others).

The role of the minister will be that of flexible leader of a basically democratic social structure. In many churches, we have the appearance of democratic structure, but with most decision-making and most leadership centered in the pastor. It will be the minister's role to call out the gifts of his congregation, not to possess them all himself — which leads to a diminution of all his powers. It will be his job to provide a structure within which others can grow and learn and share their insights and experiences and gifts.

This "democratic" leader may occasionally need to stand firm, even as a good parent must. He must occasionally be decisive or "authoritarian" when the situation calls for it, as in a crisis. And, I am convinced, he will still need to speak or "preach" occasionally as "representative man" for the group.

So, should we ignore preaching and train men only in democratic leadership styles? Certainly not. When he speaks, he should speak well. He should be able to organize his thought, use simple clear language, relate his ideas to the historical tradition out of which he comes, and present the product of that thought with power. Any leader must be articulate if he is to be a spokesman for his people. We will move away from the old-style preaching, in which one man speaks every Sunday whether he has anything to say or not. I am convinced this is the direction of history. But speaking clearly and directly and personally, witnessing to the truths within him, this will remain the opportunity and responsibility of the man or woman who claims leadership in the church. He must also be trained to listen to the feedback

and response of the people to his ideas, and be ready to listen to and honor *their* ideas.

The future training of the clergy, then, should include strong, practical training in democratic styles of leadership, self-knowledge and flexibility, awareness of the uses of authority, *and* the ability to speak or preach well.

I believe these abilities should be requirements for the granting of a professional degree in ministry. If the exercise of the profession calls for these skills, then they should be required for graduation. I am not at all sure they are best learned in academic-type courses. Some students come already trained in these areas. It may be that special workshops could be offered to help those who need practice until they are judged proficient by their colleagues, their professors, and by those upon whom they will soon inflict their leadership.

In addition, the whole curriculum may be a practice ground in which the student has opportunity to get feedback on his communication efforts and his ability to organize and integrate biblical and theological insights with life in the present.

The structure is changing, and old-style preaching will not last long in the new world emerging. But the ability to preach, even if exercised only occasionally, is still a necessary skill for potential church leaders. And in the meantime, while our young leaders prepare their people for a more participative congregational style, they will still need to do a great deal of old-style preaching.

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