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The Problem with Preaching

By David Allis

Preaching is a big problem. After many years of preaching, listening to sermons, studying the Scriptures, participating in church leadership and studying the Western church (in New Zealand), I'm becoming convinced that preaching often does more harm than good.

Preaching as it is practised in modern churches is extra-biblical, a poor form of communication, and creates dependency.

Preaching is considered one of the essential ingredients of Christianity through the last 2000 years, and arguably through Old Testament times also. It is one of the bastions of church tradition. In most churches, two central and indispensable elements are preaching and worship (commonly referred to as singing/music) during Sunday church meetings.

I believe numerous questions about preaching must be considered. They have arisen after spending years within a variety of organised churches as an observer, member, lay-leader, ordained minister and church health consultant. I have heard and preached sermons, and observed their effects in individuals' lives.

Recently I studied the biblical passages about preaching, and was surprised at what I found – that the preaching that is referred to in the New Testament (NT) bears little resemblance to the practice of preaching in churches. I also looked through the shelves of a good Bible college library. There were about 1000 books on how to preach a good sermon, yet I could find nothing that attempted to clearly justify why sermons should be preached. The vast majority assume and perpetuate the

sermon concept, and there is rarely any investigation or justification of its legitimacy.

So what are the problems with preaching?

1. Preaching is extra-Biblical

Preaching as it is practised in churches today (and in the past) has little biblical basis. In the NT preaching was always linked to preaching of the gospel or kingdom to those who were outside or on the edge of the Kingdom. The Greek verbs used in the NT to portray preaching are found overwhelmingly in situations that are outside church meetings and are evangelistic in nature.

Most people sitting in churches today listening to sermons are Christians, and most have been there listening to sermons for many years. Our preaching is actually teaching about Christianity to a predominantly Christian audience, week after week for the rest of their lives.

There is arguably no biblical basis for preaching in churches to people who have been Christians for many years. The sermon as traditionally practised, in which a clergy person preaches a message to a congregation, originated from Greek, not biblical, sources.

Around 200-300 AD the sermon emerged as central in Christian gatherings. The model for this practice wasn't taken from the Bible, but from Greek culture.

2. Preaching is an ineffective form of communication

Preaching is a form of monologue, which is proven to be an ineffective form of communication. Passive listening is an ineffective way of learning. Scientific studies of education show that passive listening leads only to a small percentage of retention. Few people can remember a sermon the next day, week or month

(often the preacher can't remember it either). Although modern communication methods are improving through the use of visual aids, the monologue remains one of the least effective forms of communication.

3. Preaching limits learning, discussion and debate

Preaching usually allows no opportunity for questions or discussion. It is rare for a church to allow interaction during a sermon, or questions and discussion time afterwards. Sermons are designed to be listened to, not interacted with. Sermons and church meeting structure doesn't allow members of the audience to add their contributions regarding the subject matter, raise issues for discussion, clarification or debate.

4. Preaching doesn't usually change lives

Although effective, impassioned preaching is occasionally able to stir some hearts and bring some response, this is quite rare. Preaching rarely brings long-term change in individual lives. The average church attender hears a sermon every week, amounting to about 2500 sermons over a 50-year church life, yet they typically can't remember many of those sermons and would number on one hand those sermons that had a significant impact on their lives.

From my limited experience, the most effective long-term way to bring change to lives is not through listening to sermons, but through participative Bible study in a mutually encouraging and challenging group.

From my study of ekklesia (the gathering of believers) in the NT, it is clear that the primary purpose of believers gathering together regularly is mutual edification. It could be argued that typical church Sunday meetings have been designed to hinder

mutual edification. Corporate sung worship led from the front and sermons by professional preachers, which are the central focus of most church services, are conspicuously absent from the New Testament passages relating to the purposes of believers gathering together.

I think Paul would be horrified at the way we have reduced worship from his whole-of-life concept to merely corporate singing once a week.

5. Preaching can foster Biblical illiteracy

Much contemporary preaching is based around themes, usually with little biblical basis. While these sermons might teach some truth and are often done in creative ways, they don't teach how to personally learn from the Bible. It is common for believers to come to church regularly and listen to well-crafted sermons about how to live, yet rarely read the Bible personally. It is not that people can never learn from a sermon, but that they don't learn as effectively as they do with other methods.

6. Preaching disempowers people

People who have been in church for many years and have often heard 50-100 sermons each year still think they need to be "fed" by a sermon each week. They remain dependent for their spiritual nurture on getting a spiritual fix each week through corporate worship and a sermon from a professional preacher. If we want to see God's kingdom grow quickly, or revival come (which many people pray for), we will need to be much better at quickly empowering and releasing people to ministry (not paid professional ministry), rather than fostering a dependence on the professional ministers.

7. Preachers are a problem

In each local church, most preaching is usually performed by one main trained professional minister. This preacher is usually a Bible college graduate (except in some Pentecostal streams) who has trained for three years so they can correctly interpret the Bible and preach inspiring sermons.

Hence, sermons are usually built around the “person of God,” who has had the in-depth theological training, and has heard from God and is now disseminating the word of God to the people in eloquent discourse. Some of the unfortunate implications of centreing preaching on one trained professional religious person are:

- It implies that one person hears from God and mediates to everyone else.
- It creates a dependence on being fed by the necessary combination of professional ordained ministers plus theological training plus eloquent preaching.
- The Christian message is filtered through one person, the preacher, and his one set of experiences, one personality, one mind, and one limited life experience.
- The preacher typically lives a different life, in a different world to his/her audience. Many don't have “normal” jobs, and are treated differently in society because they are ministers.
- It devalues the experiences, insight and revelation of other members of the church, as they are relegated to only being listeners and often never being preachers.
- By centering our gatherings on one person and their sermon, we are, in practice, reversing the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:14 and suggesting that the body is not many members, but one (often the same person, usually a man, who preaches most weeks).

8. Preaching has misleading implications

The current church practice of members attending a weekly church meeting centered on corporate-led-sung-worship and a sermon has some misleading implications:

- It implies that God is effectively saying the same thing to everyone – which is contained in the sermon.
- It implies that church members will always need to hear more sermons. If sermons are intended to train people for mission, the implication is that they will never be fully trained and will always need more. In this sense, sermons are more like motivational seminars to hype people up again, rather than being teaching sessions.
- It implies that the purpose for Christians to gather together is corporate worship and listening to sermons, rather than for the primary purpose of mutual edification (1 Cor 14:26).

9. Preaching is expensive

Sermons are expensive. A professional paid minister typically spends 1-2 days/week studying and preparing for their weekly sermon. Taking New Zealand with its 3500 churches as an example: If each had a minister being paid 1.5 days/week to preach at, say, \$200/day – this costs \$1m per week, or \$50m per year.

This might seem a small amount compared with what is spent on other aspects of organised church life, or compared with the billions tied up in church properties, but in a world where people are starving to death and Jesus spoke about personal judgement relating to how we treat the poor, it seems that we have misplaced values.

10. We are preaching to different people

The Christian situation has changed. At the time of the NT events, the NT

wasn't available to people. Also, the apostles were teaching new doctrine (in contrast, the Bible plus great study tools are now readily available to all western Christians).

Through to the 1800s, the majority of church attendees were illiterate, just as the majority of people in most societies were illiterate. Hence, there was a need for educated people to be able to read the Bible and teach others. Sermons were one effective way for this to occur. Bibles were less available and tools to help study the Bible were typically only available in libraries and seminaries.

Today, most church attendees are literate. In the English speaking western world, Bibles are cheap and most church attendees own one or many versions of the Bible. Bible study tools are cheap and easily available, both in written form and via computers and the internet.

11. We are preaching in a different context

Society has changed. In previous times, churches have been the community's social centre and drew a variety of people in various stages of belief or disbelief. In these situations, sermons were potentially an evangelistic tool, as they were during the time of Acts.

However, in current western society, the majority of people in churches are believers – hence preaching in these churches has virtually no evangelistic value. There have also been other major cultural shifts which affect preaching – Stuart Murray Williams identifies three:

1. A cultural shift away from passive instruction to participatory learning, from paternalism to partnership, from monologue to dialogue, from instruction to interaction.
2. A societal shift away from an integrated world to a world where

networks overlap, a shift away from simplicity to complexity. Many preachers seem unable to relate the Bible and theology to the world of work or to issues in public life – these are areas of profound weakness in most churches. Perhaps we need the help of those in the congregation who have expertise and experience in areas where we do not.

3. A media shift away from linear to non-linear methods of conveying information, from logical argument to pick 'n' mix learning. Communication now involves images as well as words, short contributions from diverse points of view, and open-ended presentation that allows you to choose your own conclusion. For preachers, this implies not only the use of visual communication but hard challenges about the style and purpose of preaching.

Preachers might try to respond to cultural shifts and lack of congregational interest by improving their preaching and using more stories and visual aids. While this might help, it doesn't address the deeper issues.

Why don't other people question preaching?

If the problems described are accurate, you might ask why there aren't lots of other people questioning the value of preaching. My best guesses are:

- We've been conditioned to believe that preaching is an essential part of "church."
- Preaching is part of the dependency structure created within churches. Church members have been conditioned to be fed a sermon each week. They have been taught that this is an essential aspect of being a Christian, and that they will be weak or ineffective if they aren't fed in this way. Even if sermons are boring and unproductive, they are still safe and undemanding.

- Preaching has been part of Christian tradition throughout the ages – so why would anyone question it?
- Preaching is perceived to have a biblical mandate and is seen as sacred. The biblical, historical and cultural aspects of sermons are not clearly considered.
- Ministers need to preach - it's part of their job, ministry and purpose in life. They have been trained to preach, love preaching and usually do it well. It is difficult for a minister to question an essential part of their job.
- Ministers like to preach sermons. They feel safe, fulfilled and anointed. Ministers feel responsible for their congregations, and believe that good quality sermons are an effective way to disciple their congregation.

What is the alternative?

A better and more scriptural alternative is personal and corporate Bible study, listening to God, discussion, and working together in mutually-accountable community to help each other apply biblical truths in our lives, community and world. Although there are some potential dangers in removing preaching, it is worth the risk. They are:

1. Dependent people might not learn to feed themselves. If we take away the church structures that nurture dependency, what will happen? My guess is that many churches and church attendees would collapse, including many who have been in church for many years. This is a good example of how current organised church methods have created dependency. However, unless a change like this is made, we will continue to create dependency.
2. People might only read/study what they like, and avoid some of the harder or more important issues – at least preaching may address some of the harder issues we might want to avoid.

However, mutual accountability groups can also address this issue and ensure that the full breadth of important scripture and doctrine is covered.

Conclusion

Redefining sermons as “teaching” might appear to be a solution, but much more change is required. This change in definition only really helps with the first of the 11 problems. To completely change preaching to teaching would require major change including:

1. Changing our language by getting rid of the preaching, preacher and sermon words, and replacing them with words relating to teaching.

2. Changing our methods. A monologue-sermon (or teaching) from primarily one person is an ineffective way to teach. A change to teaching would typically include changing:

- monologue to dialogue
- one preacher to multiple teachers, discussion groups, peer-to-peer learning
- fixed time frame to variable time frames
- large groups listening to one sermon to smaller groups, at different levels, studying different topics
- no-questioning to many questions
- a silent audience to a verbally involved class

3. Changing our content. An important question is whether what people need to learn is infinite, and hence people need sermons/teaching for the rest of their lives, or finite, which implies they don't need never-ending teaching. Modern Western Christians already know far more about their faith than the majority of Christians for the past 2000 years. If anything, the modern problem is lack of obedience rather than lack of knowledge.

Basically what needs to be taught (or

learnt) is how to understand and obediently apply the Biblical truths in modern Christian lives. This can be done through a mix of specific teaching and discussion in mutually accountable groups. Some of the necessary changes to content include:

- from one-sermon-for-all to different teaching for different levels of discipleship
- from one-topic-for-all to different topics for different groups
- from inspired topics to planned teaching
- from people needing a sermon each week for the rest of their lives to people who can “graduate,” having learnt the essential things (they might still have occasional in-service training)

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