

To Preach, or not to Preach: Is that really the question?

by Gary Goodell

A recent contest put on by Leadership Journal, has concluded that the top two preachers in America are T.D. Jakes and Chuck Swindoll, with each receiving 23 percent of the vote. The September 17, 2001 issue of Time Magazine carries T.D. Jakes on the cover while asking the question, "Is this man the next Billy Graham?" While Time had acknowledged Billy Graham as the long-standing holder of the distinction as America's Preacher, Vincent Synan, dean of religion at Regent University, throws Jakes into a unique category in that Jakes and Graham are the only two evangelists who could pack out Atlanta's 79,000-capacity Georgia Dome.

While these two great American orators, Jakes and Swindoll, were given high scores for their delivery, their skillful handling of the text, and their overall ability to connect well with their listeners, I was even more challenged by some of the comments that followed the contest in Leadership. In particular I was taken by a comment from Dan Kimball of Santa Cruz, California, as he stated his concern that, "Preaching is only one, small part of being a pastor. Could we subtly be teaching church attendees not how to feed themselves from the Word of God, but to become dependent on the 'greatest' preachers?"

While I would never denigrate the necessity for the word of God to be preached, (the kerygma, the Good News to be declared, Romans 10:14 still standing as a necessity, "...how will they hear without a preacher?") I can't stop asking the question as to whether Kimball has hit on something. Is it possible that as the gap deepens between the talkers and listeners that we simultaneously lessen people's eagerness and effectiveness in being message carriers to their world? By making the professional pulpit the Olympics of Oratory, do we in fact, continue to foster a pastor-dominated, sermon-driven worship machine that actually hinders the average players role in Kingdom expansion? It's like the age-old issue of experience and opportunity. Remember when you couldn't get a job because of a lack of experience, and yet you couldn't get experience because no one would give you a job?

If the question is asked, "How will they hear without a preacher?" should another question also be asked; "How will they ever get good a preaching if we always preach for them?"

I have simply concluded that too many years of doing it the same way, too much tuition moneys spent on seminary training, and too many books cracked on the subject of preaching make us feel as though we have to continue to reinforce the pastor's preeminent performance in the pulpit. After all, isn't that what the pastors were trained to do? Isn't that what pastors are paid for? It is very possible that too much tradition and the reinforcement of tradition forces us to continue to overstate the role as pastor and preacher. So we keep being mesmerized by contests for the best preachers, and the biggest audiences rather than looking for more effective ways to release church as a whole to do their best in growing and penetrating their culture?

Professor Robert Webber sees it like this, "I began to see that the pastor dominates much of our worship. From early childhood, I have been accustomed to the pastor doing everything. But in the past few years, I've noticed that I have become particularly sensitive to pastor-dominated worship services. Whenever I worship or speak at a church where the pastor is the focal point, I feel dominated and stifled. I find myself longing to participate, to be involved. I want to respond to what's going on, to say "Amen" or "Thanks be to God" or give witness to my faith or pray. But in churches where the pastor-figure is central, any response is often looked at as odd or inappropriate. In this situation my stomach actually feels tied up in knots, my muscles tense, and my whole body feels trapped, even caged in. My spirit and thus my worship are affected. I feel as though I'm not worshipping; I'm not actively participating. Rather, the pastor is doing everything for me. I'm simply a receiver, a passive recipient of the actions of one other person."

According to Webber, congregations dominated by the pastor or the pastoral staff become passive spectators-- they begin to treat the Sunday church meetings as just another form of entertainment, such as sitting down to watch television, attending a play, concert, or catching a dinner show. Webber, *Worship is a Verb*.

While strolling down the street next to our offices in San Diego, I was in conversation with a brother who is a part of our fellowship and attends one of our house churches. We had just eaten breakfast together, and had enjoyed a really stimulating conversation over our meal. As we walked to our cars, I asked him about what the rest of his day looked like. He stated that night he would be attending his house church, and commented it was hard. When I asked him why, he said, "I think I like movie church, you know, where you can just go and sit and watch and then leave, but in my house church they won't let me do that."

Teaching and training people that as they come to a gathering, they are integral, they are necessary, and they are vital, is a far stretch from this "movie-entertainment-type church." When we instruct them (and believe me, it takes a lot of instruction and modeling!) that they are there not just to observe, to show mental assent, and to pay for services rendered as the "plate" is passed, but, in fact, that they are responsible for the quality and flow of the gathering as they fully engage and fully participate in this wonderful experience called "church," you can be sure that many will struggle. At least at first. Mainly, again, because it seems the only model we have had is that of the "talking head" model. Now we even have contests to decide who is the best of those "talking heads."

In some of my past preaching articles on Third Day Preaching (www.thirddaychurches.com), I have tried to share ideas, exercises, or games we can play that can begin to draw out the listener and make him or her a participant. This is a process. It doesn't just happen automatically. The more you intentionally make room for others, the more you will raise a new standard for how meetings are to go. But be warned, where many will feel uncomfortable, and even threatened, many will like it. And as people are drawn upon to now see them as a room full of resources that God has placed there for a more multifaceted meal, many will shift in their mindset and actually come to the meetings carrying their gifts. They will want, and even expect to be given the opportunity of sharing their gifts with the body.

So again, in one sense, it is not about getting the Word, the Bible into a meeting, it is about how we do this. The shift away from the paid professional being the only delivery system is the issue. How about two sermons from two different individuals, or even three, or maybe the weaving of an exhortation, a teaching, a prophecy and a testimony. Two recent conversations with a couple of the leaders I am currently working with let me know that they were starting to get it. One came to me at the end of one of our meetings, as I had been challenging the people to participate more, and said, "Hey, Gary, how about telling or letting us know the actual text you or whoever will be speaking on next week, so we can pray over and study the text at home, and see if God gives us anything to share or add next week to the message?" The other leader pointed out to me that his sense was that the more prepared I came to the meeting, the less others feel adequate, particularly in the area of the teaching of the Word.

In a recent Sunday gathering, I was talking (and yes...I still am the talking head on occasions when I have a strong word and feel I need to share it!). But before I began, I handed out two small laminated signs, each one carrying a single word, which was the theme of my talk for that day. I handed one to each side of the room where people were sitting. I told the people simply to look at these little signs and then pass them along to someone else. A few minutes later, I stopped, and asked where the signs were and asked that person who had the sign to stand and give their definition of the word or theme on the sign. At first, there was some hesitation as everyone now realized the price that would be paid to have the sign in one's possession when I paused to ask for a definition. But after they got over the initial shock that I was actually soliciting feedback, this little exercise began to flow. By the end of the talk, it was working so well that

some people were holding on to the sign, or even wanted it back, because they so eagerly wanted to participate and add to the meeting.

Many nations of the world do not have the luxury of highly trained seminarians leading their meetings, and yet their churches are growing by leaps and bounds with the priesthood of the believer at full tilt. Here we are in a country that even has contests to determine the “greatest preachers” of its day. Yet we have people coming to our meetings week after week without engaging, without participating, and thus without growing. Dr. Karl Coke has even stated, that he believes, the church is at its weakest level of spiritual maturity in its history.

If people are invited to “virtual church” where everyone is encouraged to interact, to participate, to be a vital part, they will begin to grow. They will grow because there is a direct correlation in divine stewardship as to “getting out” proportionally, what you “put in.”

Dave Kahle addresses the devastating impact of our current model upon believers, when he says, "The institutional church, with its reliance on paid pastors, church buildings, teaching and worship services, has created a passive, spectator form of Christianity that bleeds the power out of its adherents and siphons resources away from the building of God's kingdom."

For years I have prided myself as being a lifelong learner. I read (my wife tells me too much!), I go to conferences, seminars, workshops, always wanting to learn more. Well then, what about the people I am leading? I not only know they want to learn more; I also know that they will learn best when they put into action or practice what they are learning. That includes sharing, even in a public church gathering, what God is showing them, or what they are getting from Him, and how it is working in their lives.

I do agree with those prophets, those prognosticators of our day when they warn us that times have changed, and we must change with the times. Erik Hoffer once said, “In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists. ‘The world we knew no longer exists.’ Efforts to recreate that world are futile. Therefore, we need a new kind of leader to deal with today’s changing world: a learner.”

I just wonder, what kind of system are we creating, when we the preachers, eating hearty, healthy biblical meals during our weekly studies, to only then regurgitate these meals into smaller rations for the masses on Sunday morning? Or, have we really been called to create learning colonies, or learning societies, where people receive and release. Places where they get and give away. Places where the final test, or the final contest as to whether we are good at what we are doing is found in the end product of the shy, untrained, neophyte standing up in a worship celebration and sharing some thoughts that deeply effect those in attendance? Not because we as leaders are lazy, or bored, or burnt-out, but because we have actually planned the meeting so that others are encouraged to participate.

For years, my worth as a pastor, at least in my mind, was based upon my ability to perform. And perform I did, from the earliest days of long periods of research and preparation for each message, each part that I played in the meeting. Even as a worship-leading-lad in my father’s church, I was diligent to make sure I had a cute story about each hymn I would lead and at least a verse or comment for each chorus. I took this call to lead very seriously. And I still do. It is just that I am trying to lead differently.

I am currently experimenting with different kinds of gatherings, for different kinds of purposes. And I am seeing that teaching people in smaller groups, that are highly interactive and highly participatory, are, in fact, better than the download to the masses in large, passive settings. This is not revolutionary; it is simply facing the fact that the large lecture-driven meeting is probably not the best place for people to really “get” what we are saying. And it is realizing that transformation and not just more information, regardless of how slick and high-tech the presentation.

There are so many creative things we can do. But ultimately, we must first admit that what we have been doing is not working. So how much longer will we perpetuate the model of the glazed over looks of non-connected listeners as they stare at the overly compensating “talking heads?”

C'mon, we can do better than that! Particularly as we take seriously our mandate to “prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” Ephesians 4. Because the purpose of the church is people development, not just pastor performance, we must return to a biblical model that discourages spectators and applauds participators.

Pastors, your new job in this new way of doing church (if you choose to take it), is even greater and more far-reaching than before. As mentors-coaches-facilitators, you get to create an atmosphere and coach a team, rather than isolate yourself behind your research and pre-planned sermons. You get to break the predictability of the three-piece suit and the three-point homily and coach an army to march. Will you ever preach again? Of course you will! Maybe even better. Many times you will wrap up and/or apply what the Father has been saying through many, in any given meeting. Sometimes you’ll have such a burning word that you will have to give it. A, it will come out of the heart of combustion in the prophetic moment.

Actually, I quit listening to the bare contents of sermons a long time ago. What I do now is listen for what it is that people “carry.” What is their life message? What is burning in them so hot it cannot be quenched? As God raises spiritual fathers and mothers these days, this next generation needs to get what we “carry.” Rather than a need to control a meeting, we get to carry a fatherly release to give permission to others in our gatherings. Rather than the meeting being about us, it is about them, and thus, ultimately about Him. How does the Father want to speak to us today? What is His agenda? What does He want to say? And whom does He want to say it through? Now, that’s church!

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