

Problems and Limitations of the Traditional "Sermon" Concept

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It must be said at the outset that I am *not* against sound, biblical and doctrinal teaching within the assembly of believers. The New Testament is very clear on the need for instruction from elders and gifted teachers (Acts 13:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:2; 4:6,13,16; 5:17; 2 Timothy 1:13; 4:2; Titus 1:9). Moreover, I do not oppose diligent study, preparation, and learning skills which help one to be a more effective teacher (2 Timothy 2:15). *Thus, to question the "sermon" concept should not be equated with the mistaken notion that we do not need teaching or teachers within our churches.* There are, however, some inherent problems and limitations with the "sermon" idea. The following is a brief examination of some of those problems.

1. There exists a plethora of books on preaching and homiletics written by evangelicals, but the overwhelming majority of them merely assume and perpetuate the sermon concept. Rarely, if ever, is there any real analysis or investigation as to its legitimacy.
2. The very notion of a formal and professionalized "sermon" comes not from the New Testament, but from Greek culture. With the rise of the Constantinian mass church (4th century A.D.), all sorts of paganistic and Greek ideas entered into Christian thought and practice. One of those practices brought into the church was that of Greek rhetoric. With the conversion of such men as Chrysostom, Ambrose, Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, and Augustine – all of whom were trained in rhetoric and were quite popular as orators within the Greco-Roman culture of their day prior to their conversion – a new style or form of communication began to occur within Christian assemblies (it is interesting to note that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1:17,22 and 2:1-5, refused to allow the communication patterns of his pagan contemporaries to dictate the form or manner of his delivery).

This new form of speech was marked by polished rhetoric, sophisticated grammar, and an undue emphasis on eloquence. Corporate teaching, within many congregations, was no longer delivered in normal or raw language, but began to take on an artistic form of expression. In some instances, the *content* of the teacher's message was less influenced by biblical truth and more by abstract Greek philosophy.

Within time, corporate teaching became more of a form designed to entertain and display the speaker's oratorical skill or colorful wit, rather than instruct and equip the saints for ministry. Eventually, when the "clergy-laity" division was solidified, only those who were officially "ordained" and trained in the new forms of speech were allowed to address the assembly. This did much to render the saints inactive and helped to promote the idea that only the "professionals" have anything worthy to say.

3. The sermon concept has so permeated our churches that many people do not feel that they have attended "church" until they hear a forty-five minute sermon. Great men of God from past ages, in the minds of many Christians, are not revered for their Christ-like character and ability to equip God's people for ministry, but for their oratorical skills. Even today, our greatest saints are those who are most eloquent, thunderous, or dynamic when preaching or lecturing. That which holds many churches together (particularly "mega" churches) is not a body of believers mutually loving and serving one another, but the pastor's dynamics within the pulpit!

4. Congregational communication and teaching within the early apostolic churches appear to have followed a much different structure than our traditional sermon. For instance, when Paul spoke to the believers at Troas in Acts 20:7, the term "preached" [KJV] (*dialegomai*) comes from a Greek word which means "to dialogue" or "carry on a discussion" (cf. Acts 19:8f). It appears, then, that teaching for Paul was not a mere one-way type of communication wrapped up in abstract and esoteric language, but a two-way type of communication or dialogue for the purpose of promoting edification and practical piety. The same could be said for the judging of prophecies mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:29-32 and 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 which suggest that some kind of interaction or dialogue was taking place within the assembly. We see this as well in 1 John 4:1 where the apostle John commands the entire church to "test the spirits." How could this have been done unless there was some opportunity during the meeting to ask questions and dialogue over the alleged prophecy or teaching (cf. Revelation 2:2)? Even Paul's recognition of the necessity of "factions" among the Corinthian believers so that those "who are approved may become evident among you" (1 Corinthians 11:19) clearly implies that dialogue, critical discernment, and differing viewpoints were taking place when they gathered. The point is, no one was expected to passively and naively accept the words of another; all were expected to evaluate whatever was said in the light of apostolic doctrine. Paul even commended the Bereans when they evaluated or tested his teachings (Acts 17:11)! *This is not meant to suggest that Paul, in certain circumstances, never employed a monologue, but only that the apostolic pattern appears to be one of dialogue and mutual interaction.*

The early church, it seems, had an *open system of communication*, but we, in contrast, have preferred a *closed* one. Is it any wonder why so few within our churches seem to fully comprehend the sermons and, thus, spiritually grow under our traditional practice of one-way style of communication/preaching? Our "sermon" tradition simply leaves no room for

listener participation in the communication process. Thus, with nothing to say, ask, or contribute, the saints are rendered passive.

5. As any good educator knows, people simply do not learn as effectively within a one-way communication kind of format. They learn by being asked questions and provoked to dialogue. When this occurs, people begin to truly think, reason, and "own" the message communicated. By doing this, we can more effectively bring the saints into the learning process, rather than simply dumping a message on the congregation and never truly knowing whether we got through to them or not.

Preaching is commonly a one-way event, and that this characteristic is in opposition to any hope that communication may occur through the sermon event. Communication is intended to bring together meanings from both sides, but monologue is really only interested in imposing meaning from one side. A predictable result is that people tend to be removed from active participation in the sermon, with a corresponding loss of relevance for the hearers. The clergy assume a monopolistic role. One speaks while others can only listen. The whole event may seem distant and impersonal. There is little incentive to struggle to find the meaning of the Word for today, resulting in a loss of power (George W. Swank, *Dialogic Style in Preaching* [Valley Forge, PA: Hudson Press, 1981] p.24).

[Another] characteristic of conventional preaching is seen in the absence of organized response or feedback from the congregation. Lack of feedback strengthens all the stereotypes which people entertain about preaching. Preaching is frequently done to an invisible congregation because the lights have been turned down; yet the facial expressions and bodily postures and movements of the congregation are communications in response to the preacher, and he needs to see and note them as at least partial guidance for his speaking. *The custom of preaching without response from the congregation is irresponsible communication* and endangers, more than anything else, the preacher's relevance (Ruel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* [New York: Seabury Press, 1967] p.36).

If students are to learn to think, they must be placed in situations where they have to do so. The situations in which they are obliged to think are those in which they have to answer questions because questions demand an active response. Although it could be modified to do so, the traditional expository lecture does not demand this . . . The best way to learn to solve problems is to be given problems that have to be solved. The best way to 'awaken critical skills' is to practice using the canons of criticism. If this thesis seems obvious common sense, *it should be remembered that some people place faith in their lectures to stimulate thought, and expect thinking skills to be absorbed, like some mystical vapors, from a college atmosphere.* Psychologists are likely to wince at the impression of such a notion; *and learning to think is not an absorption process* (D.A. Bligh, *What's the Use of Lectures?* [Exeter University, 1978] pp.13,16).

6. Even when Paul and others preached to *unbelievers*, there was almost always an opportunity for the listeners to engage in feedback or discussion. If this is true with unbelievers, how much more important and needful is it when teaching believers!

The sermon was always followed by general discussion, and it was here that the Christian preacher got the greatest chance of all to communicate the Christian message. The word that we come on again and again in regard to the preaching of the Christians in the synagogue is the word *dispute* or *argue*. The Jews disputed with Stephen but could not meet his arguments (Acts 6:9-10). Paul argued in the synagogue at Thessalonica (Acts 17:2); he argued in the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:2); he argued in the synagogue at Ephesus (Acts 18:19). Here is the great basic fact of early preaching. *Early preaching was not a monologue, but a dialogue*. It was not a question of one man telling a crowd of men; it was a case of a group telling it over together (William Barclay, *Communicating the Gospel* [Sterling, Scotland: The Drummond Press, 1968] pp.34-35).

7. In order to better facilitate learning within our churches, pastors should begin to implement a Q&A period after the sermon on what was just taught. What would be wrong in allowing a stimulating time for questions, comments, or even disagreements? What better way could there be in helping people to learn and remember what the pastor had so earnestly labored to teach? If we really want to see the saints equipped for ministry (Ephesians 4:12) and to present every man complete in Christ (Colossians 1:28), why would we ignore or even reject such an effective and biblical means of communication? Do we truly believe that the Sunday morning sermon is to be a learning experience?

The important point is that the Bible example indicates the need for two-way communication in those instances when we expect comprehension, acceptance, and commitment to take place. We also know that there is a steady increase of accuracy as feedback is increased. Therefore, for one to establish comprehensive and complete communication, for one to discover and transmit the truths of Scripture and the content of the Christian Gospel, monologue is not enough. A two-way flow of communication is essential (William Barlow, "Communicating the Gospel," *Searching Together* [Vol. 21:1-4, 1993] p.57).

Unfortunately, many pastors will not allow it because they are threatened or intimidated by any form of return dialogue within a public setting. At least five reasons can account for this: (1) Return dialogue is offensive to the man who sees himself and his opinions as above the right of anyone to question, particularly when coming from mere "laymen"; (2) Return dialogue may expose the speaker to the possibility of embarrassing questions that he may not be able to answer. It may reveal that his studies and preparation were shallow. It may reveal that he is not necessarily the Bible "authority" that he parades as; (3) Return dialogue removes the spotlight from one man and brings others into its realm, which can be very disconcerting to the man who has an ego to feed; (4) Return dialogue is offensive to the man who wants his congregation to be dependent upon him for all the "answers." If

people are allowed to voice their disagreements or perhaps even articulate an answer better than he can, it tends to remove their dependence upon his wisdom for understanding the text of Scripture; (5) Allowing a Q&A period after the sermon poses structural or organizational problems for church leaders who have set their "order of worship" in concrete, allowing exact time limits for everything with no flexibility or spontaneity within the corporate meeting.

8. The monologue sermon format, by its very structure, fails to fully challenge people and allows them to get their religious "fix" without any meaningful contribution.

Meanwhile, the man in the pew has a satisfaction provided by the very process of sitting through the sermon no matter what is said from the pulpit and may explain why many people continue to attend church even when they are not listening to the pastor's message. They may be experiencing an unconscious sense of atoning for their misdeeds simply by going through the motions of sitting quietly and appearing to listen. This leaves a man free to continue living as before, unchallenged, uncommitted, and unchanged, while feeling whole and clean or forgiven, structuring his life so as to keep God out – or at a distance (Barlow, "Communicating the Gospel," p.56).

9. The traditional sermon format helps to keep the saints in an infantile state and fosters an unhealthy dependence upon the preacher. *It's not that people can't learn from a monologue sermon, but only that they do not learn as effectively when never afforded the opportunity to ask questions or make relevant comments.*

The very structure of the sermon is a dependence structure in which the "children" sit at the father's feet while he does all the talking, as they are encouraged to learn, not to evaluate. Any talk by him of "my church," "my ministry," "my people" actually indicates a spirit of domination, not service. Regrettably, the "children" do not mature in the process, but are expected to return next week for a repeat experience (Barlow, "Communicating the Gospel," p.57).

10. A major means of combating the anti-intellectualism within today's church, including the weak and imprecise theology which many preachers are guilty of articulating, is through the use of Q&A and verbal feedback.

11. Reading through the apostolic fathers (e.g., Polycarp, Ignatius, Clement, Eusebius, et al.), one notices the conspicuous absence of a "sermon" when discussing ecclesiastical matters. In his survey of the early church fathers, Craig A. Evans has noticed this very point:

Although many things are mentioned, including submission to the elders, there is no exhortation to pay close attention to the sermons or other 'preaching' within the context of the assembled group. This is an argument from silence to be sure, but it is worth noting

nevertheless that there is no mention of preaching pastors and listening congregations. In summary of the evidence of the apostolic fathers it can be said that such concepts as 'preacher' and 'preaching' are only in contexts of Gospel proclamation to unbelievers. When it comes to the activity within the church, however, fellowship, teaching, admonition and social care are emphasized. Nowhere do we find a discussion of the pastor preaching to the congregation on a regular basis. From this we should not conclude that it never happened (for on special occasions it was required, as noted above) but that it was simply not the customary practice. Rather than one man preaching to an audience the church of the apostolic fathers experienced active involvement of the membership. This is a proper reflection of the picture we have in the New Testament itself . . . The common practice today of the clergyman preaching a sermon to a passive audience seems to have its origin in tradition (and/or expedience) rather than in a Scriptural pattern ("Preacher' and 'Preaching': Some Lexical Observations," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* [December – 1981, Vol.24/No.4] pp.320-321).

12. The traditional monologue sermon, in most cases, does not go far enough. It is information-oriented, but that's all.

If the pastor has been trained in most evangelical schools, he will continue to give great "chalk talks." He will inspire the spirit, warm the heart, fill the mind, but the team will never leave the huddle . . . How long would a football coach last if his team never left the huddle? *Many pastors do nothing more than give "chalk talks," and people think they are doing their jobs.* The American church is so easily duped that the pastor/teller has become the most highly esteemed member of the religious establishment. He tells people what and why, but that is where it stops. Those who think of themselves as pastor/teachers normally consider their main task giving "chalk talks." Others revere them as great speakers; many become evangelical luminaries; *yet I submit they are not pastor/teachers; they are pastor/tellers.* Pastor/tellers do not prepare God's people for works of service; they talk to people about works of service, but they do not fulfill their God-given responsibility. Please do not misinterpret my words. I believe that effective telling of God' people is a first and crucial step to their preparation. I work hard at communicating the Word of God to the congregation. But if I stop at telling, I am not teaching . . . *The most common myth is that effective preaching leads to effective ministry.* Effective preaching is a good start to the process, but falls far short of effective ministry. *Over 90 percent of pastors must face the reality that preaching is not enough . . .* Many pastors will agree that preaching is not enough, but they do not consider it their responsibility to fill in the gaps. *They have been thoroughly schooled in the erroneous belief that their main role is to preach.* This false notion is a clear example of reading cultural trends into Scripture . . . Telling people what to do without providing the means to do it is cruel and defrauding. It creates spiritual schizophrenia, Christians who are experts on what they are not experiencing. Not only does it leave people unprepared for ministry, they become guilty and frustrated with the Christian life. This also gives the Devil a choice opportunity to create problems inside the church. When an army never goes to war, it by necessity focuses on shining boots, making

beds, and marching in a straight line. The church that does not move to action by necessity must focus on *Roberts Rules of Order*, committee rules, and acquisition of pulpit furniture. The pastor as teacher is the pastor as coach. Teaching means more than telling people what and telling them why. It progresses to showing them how, doing it with them, letting them do it, and deploying them into the harvest field (Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor* [Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1988] pp.94-96).

One who does not have to undertake responsibility in life will not develop mentally or morally. His character will remain undisciplined and his intelligence fallow. Similarly, the exercise of responsibility in spiritual ministry is necessary to the development of spiritual character and intelligence. *These cannot be acquired by listening to sermons. As Carlyle aptly says, "To sit as a passive bucket and be pumped into, can be exhilarating to no creature, how eloquent soever be the flood of utterance that is descending." Teaching alone will not produce Christians fully developed in understanding and efficient in service.* Theory without practice and experience would never make a physician or an engineer or a farmer . . . The instructor may be a brilliant and conscientious man, *but the pupil must always learn to apply the instruction by practice . . .* Much of the textual sermonizing that is done today accomplishes little that is permanent. Its affect is transient; it is but a momentary stimulant. Congregations that have sat under such preaching for ten and twenty years are today still spiritual babes, both in knowledge and experience. That type of preaching will never prepare a group of converts to be left to carry on their own work (Alexander R. Hay, *The New Testament Order for Church and Missionary* [Published by The New Testament Missionary Union, 1947] pp.292-293,414).

13. By centering our gatherings on one man and his "sermon" (which is what many evangelical churches do, even though they would never admit to it), 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 (namely, the same man who preaches to us week after week). Moreover, by centering our church meetings on one man's ability to speak, we subtly begin to form a personality-cult around one man's talents. Eventually, he becomes the final authority on spiritual and theological matters and we end up producing our own brand of "Protestant Pope's."

14. The focal-point of one man's sermon tends to cause believers to feel incapable of handling the Word of God because the impression is given (however subtle it might be) that only the eloquent and seminary trained "professionals" can undertake such things as preaching and teaching. The entire aura of preaching a "sermon" is very intimidating and many career preachers are more concerned with *how* they communicate than with *what* is communicated. A bad morning for such pulpiteers is not a failure to teach the full-counsel of God, but a slip-up of the tongue or in mispronouncing a word!

15. Directly connected to the traditional sermon concept, is the practice of limiting corporate instruction to one gifted pastor (usually the "senior pastor"). But in contrast to

our inherited traditions, the New Testament never limits public teaching to one pastor (regardless of how eloquent he may be) nor is it limited to those who serve as church overseers, but may include gifted teachers who may have no desire to serve in the eldership (Acts 13:1; Romans 12:7; 1 Corinthians 12:29; 14:26).

1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of "those" (not him) who work hard at preaching and teaching. 1 Thessalonians 5:12, likewise, mentions "those" (not him) who "give you instruction." Thus, there is no scriptural warrant for limiting "pulpit preaching" to one pastor alone. As a matter of fact, the local church is greatly benefited when it utilizes the teaching skills of a plurality of elders. Allow me to briefly mention a few of them:

A. No man, no matter how gifted or "dynamic," can speak to all the spiritual needs within a church. The congregation needs the wisdom and scriptural insight which a plurality of godly men can provide. No church should be expositionally-dependent upon one alone for its instruction.

B. A church is less likely to fall into cultic doctrine when a plurality of informed teachers are present and accountable to each other for what they publicly say.

C. A plurality of corporate teachers helps to doctrinally balance a church and keep it from the theological fringe. The different perspectives which each teacher brings helps to sharpen a church's understanding of God's truth, broaden their grasp of theology, and demonstrate that biblical exegesis requires hard work (2 Timothy 2:15). It also helps a congregation from reaching simplistic conclusions about the meaning of Scripture, since they will sometimes hear another viewpoint or interpretation.

D. As pointed out earlier, a plurality of teachers within the corporate setting helps to reduce the possibility of a personality-cult forming around one man.

E. A plurality of teachers reduces the possibility of pastor burn-out – a syndrome which many pastors fall into because they are expected to take on the entire load of public teaching. With very little time allowed for deep reflection upon what is learned, and with the pressing need to crank out another message before the end of the week, along with a multiplicity of other tasks, it's no wonder that the average pastor's sermon is often forced or simplistic.

16. What our churches need are not more professional orators or slick, three-point "sermons," but men who are willing to properly equip and lead the people of God to do that which He has called them to do: Ministry! [Ephesians 4:11-12] We need men who understand spiritual gifts and their proper function in the local church; men who truly know the people they oversee and who are wise in helping to guide them where they can best serve the cause of Christ. But for pulpiteers, we have enough of them. What we need are more spiritual facilitators.

"Preaching" and "Teaching" as Related to the Sermon Concept:

1. According to the New Testament, there is a distinction between "preaching" and "teaching." *Teaching* is primarily directed toward believers for their edification and spiritual development in the Christian walk, whereas *preaching* is primarily directed toward unbelievers for the purpose of encouraging a saving response to the Gospel message. *Teaching* generally covers the entire gamut of theological and ethical issues which relate to the Christian life, whereas *preaching* generally covers only the essentials of the salvation message. Thus, these two terms, as used in the New Testament, indicate a distinction in both *content* and *audience*.

The New Testament writers draw a clear distinction between preaching and teaching. The distinction is preserved alike in the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypse, and must be considered characteristic of early Christian usage in general. *Teaching* (didaskhein) is in the large majority of cases ethical instruction . . . *Preaching* on the other hand is the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world . . . The verb "to preach" frequently has for its object "the Gospel." Indeed, the connection of ideas is so close that *keryssein* by itself can be used as a virtual equivalent for *evangelizesthai*, "to preach the Gospel." It would not be too much to say that wherever "preaching" is spoken of, it always carries with it the implication of "good tidings" proclaimed. For the early church, then, to preach the Gospel was by no means the same thing as to deliver moral instruction or exhortation. While the church was concerned to hand on the teaching of the Lord, it was not by this that it made converts. It was by the *kerygma*, says Paul, not by the *didache*, that it pleased God to save men (1 Corinthians 1:21) (C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, pp.7ff).

Strictly speaking, the principal biblical words translated "preaching" do not correspond exactly to that activity to which we affix the label. They are somewhat narrower in scope. These words, *kerusso* and *euangelizo*, are used in the New Testament to describe "heralding" and "announcing the Gospel." They refer to evangelistic activity. The former always has to do with public proclamation of the good news, while the latter may be used to describe making the Gospel known to either unsaved groups or individuals (cf. Acts 8:35). On the other hand, the word *didasko*, translated "to teach," more nearly corresponds to our modern use of the word preach, and has to do with the proclamation of truth among those who already believe the Gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:17) . . . Whatever speaking is carried on in the church after it has assembled, though never divorced from the Gospel message, is *didaskalia*, or "teaching" (cf. 1 Timothy 4:16; 5:17) (Jay E. Adams, *Preaching With Purpose* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982] pp.5-6).

Although G.P. Hugenberger, writing in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Vol.3, pp.939-943), does not make the broad distinction between "preaching" and "teaching" as does C.H. Dodd, he still admits: "In support of Dodd, it remains striking that

in the vast majority of cases (although not every case, contra Dodd) 'preaching' in the New Testament is, in fact, directed to unbelievers."

If it is indeed true that, *generally speaking*, "preaching" is primarily directed towards unbelievers and "teaching" is primarily directed towards believers, then it is more than likely that the form of delivery or manner of instruction to each of these groups would tend to be different as well (although we cannot be too dogmatic). In *preaching to unbelievers*, the delivery would be an urgent proclamation; a monologue with no expectation necessarily of mutual exchange or lengthy discussion. However, in *teaching believers*, the delivery is less urgent and would tend to follow a dialogue structure – not because the message is less important per se – but because the speaker is attempting to impart information in a more or less methodical manner to those who are already redeemed. This would suggest, therefore, that we should not generally employ or get locked into one form of communication pattern (such as the monologue sermon) when seeking to instruct believers. The problem today, unfortunately, is that the vast majority of pastors employ only the monologue "preaching" method when addressing believers, allowing no opportunity for questions, comments, or clarifications either during or after the message.

2. When gathering with other believers, are the saints to be preached at or taught? Should Gospel preaching have a dominant place in our churches? Some have seen justification for "preaching" Gospel sermons in the church because of Paul's statement to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:2, "teach and *preach* these principles." However, the Greek word "preach" in this text means to *exhort, entreat, or urge* (cf. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977] p.482). Most translations have, therefore, rendered it this way (e.g., KJV, RSV, NIV, Amplified, Jewish NT).

It would also be difficult to see in 1 Timothy 5:17 any warrant for our practice of monologue Gospel "preaching" within the assembly. New Testament commentator, Homer A. Kent, Jr., writes: "The anarthrous form *logoi* ("preaching") has reference to the general function of speech in connection with the elder's ministry. The term *didaskaliai* ("teaching") is more limited and denotes the particular aspect of teaching or instructing, as distinguished from exhorting, admonishing, comforting, and other forms of preaching" (*The Pastoral Epistles* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1982/Revised] p.175).

The words of Paul in 2 Timothy 4:2 ("preach the Word"), likewise, fail to support this notion of Gospel sermons in the church. Paul commands Timothy to herald or "preach" the Word and to be ready at all times to do so – whether it is convenient or not. The "Word" in this passage appears to be the proclamation of the Gospel which may or may not occur within the assembly. However, the fact that Paul later urges Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist" (v.5) suggests that his heralding was done primarily *outside* of the Christian gathering when coming into close contact with unbelievers. It is important to remember as well that these words (2 Timothy 4:2,5) apply uniquely to Timothy, and not to those who serve as shepherds in the local church (many of whom are not gifted as evangelists).

Moreover, Timothy was *not* a local church pastor (as is commonly assumed), but an apostolic assistant; a temporary delegate of Paul's to set things in order and to correct abuses. He was not "in charge" of any local congregation. The late William Hendriksen, author of *Survey of the Bible* (England: Evangelical Press, 1976), writes:

The "minister" at Ephesus was Timothy. We purposely surround the term "minister" with quotation marks, for Timothy's office was not exactly identical with that of the present day local pastor, whose main duties are limited to just one congregation to which he is bound until he accepts a call to go elsewhere. Timothy occupies a special office: he is Paul's special emissary, representing the apostle now in this, then in that congregation. Moreover, such men would often "minister" to an entire group of churches (p.407).

Thus, as an apostolic assistant, Timothy would not only help the churches that Paul previously planted, but frequently, in the course of his itinerant ministry, would find himself in the presence of unbelievers and would need to boldly preach the Gospel to them.

3. According to the New Testament, a preacher, as one who preaches the Gospel to those who are ignorant of it; and a local church pastor, as one who shepherds the flock, are *not* one and the same. A preacher not only heralds the Gospel to the unbelieving masses, but his ministry is *itinerant*. A pastor, on the other hand, instructs and equips believers, and his ministry is *stationary*, working only with one congregation. His goal is not necessarily to convert the people he shepherds because, hopefully, they are already regenerate. This is confirmed by the uses of "preaching" and "preacher" in both the New Testament and the early apostolic fathers. By confusing, therefore, the distinct roles of "preacher" and "pastor," we make the mistake of assuming that both believers and unbelievers should be addressed the same (i.e., through monologue preaching) and given the same message (i.e., Gospel sermons).

The problem that most churches today are experiencing is apathy. There is a lack of meaningful involvement on the part of the congregation. It seems that many pastors have confused the distinct activities of "preaching" and "overseeing." If the pastor defines himself as a "preacher," then on the basis of what he believes to be faithful adherence to what the New Testament teaches, emphasis is placed on preaching. Since preaching or heralding is almost always monologic it is no wonder that the congregation begins to feel like an audience. Monologue is inherent in heralding – appropriate for Gospel proclamation – but it can be detrimental for edifying and the "equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4:12). To be sure, occasion may necessitate a strong sermon of exhortation, refutation or teaching, but there are no biblical grounds for a tradition that tends to discourage congregational activity in worship and ministry. In this day of concern over the lagging vitality and ineffectiveness of many churches a reappraisal is imperative. It may be that one area where fruitful change could take place is in understanding the role of the parish minister within the context of the assembled congregation (Evans, "'Preacher' and 'Preaching': Some Lexical Observations," pp.321-322).

4. Where did our practice of preaching a monologue Gospel sermon to assembled believers on a weekly basis come from? Much of it came from the Protestant Reformers who saw the "church" as consisting of all those within a given territory – saved and unsaved. Because so many unbelievers were present within the Reformation churches (and even compelled to attend), it was necessary to continually preach the Gospel to them.

Where, however, there exists the *territorial* or *state* conception of the church, and the whole society in a given territory, saved and unsaved alike, belong to the "church" – preaching is the necessary function within the church. Here the unredeemed are expected to sit among the believers in the congregation, and to them the Gospel must be preached. In the state or mass church the preaching of salvation takes the place of teaching. For the *didache* is not for the unconverted. They are only saved through the proclamation (*kerygma*) of the Gospel. And since the congregation usually meets only on Sunday, there is not much, or any, room left for teaching. Thus preaching occurs at the expense of teaching. The pastor becomes the preacher. The believers do not get the right food (teaching), the congregation never reaches full maturity, and there is no outreach, no preaching done to the outside by emerging mature Christians. Why are there so few evangelists and teachers emerging out of our present congregations? Why is the enrollment at our Mennonite seminaries on such a low level and seemingly on the decrease? Preachers and teachers are not produced by preaching. The Christians who "by this time . . . ought to be teachers," and preachers, remain babes in Christ and eventually "become dull of hearing" (Hebrews 5:11-12) (Hans-Joachim Weehler, "Preaching in the Church?" *Searching Together* [Autumn – 1982, Vol.11/No.3] pp.36-37).

It is one of the incredible paradoxes of history that the Reformers, who so boldly and effectively recaptured the Gospel of Grace from its medieval distortion and restored the central message of justification by faith, should have retained the mass church of the mixed multitude, the territorial church of the Constantinian compromise, in which real faith was not a requirement for membership (H. Bender, *These Are My People*, p.70).

A fundamental doctrine, in the system of church order which we have deduced from the Scriptures, is, that genuine piety [salvation] is necessary to church-membership. If this doctrine had been steadfastly maintained from the times of the apostles, the corruption which overspread the churches would have been prevented, and the papal apostasy would never have occurred. The admission of unconverted members opened the door to every evil, and ultimately subjected the churches to the spirit that worketh in the children of disobedience. The Reformation by Luther corrected many abuses, but this chief inlet of mischief it did not close. Hence the Reformed churches do not exhibit the purity, devotion, and zeal which characterized the churches of primitive times. We need a more thorough reformation. We need to have the axe laid at the root of the trees, and this is done when none are admitted to church-membership but persons truly converted (J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order* [Harrison, VA: Gano Books Reprint, 1990] pp.275-276).

5. We are not saying that we should never explain the Gospel to believers so that they can better comprehend its content and implications. Neither are we denying that, in special circumstances, there might be the need within the assembly to declare the Gospel message – but only that continuously preaching Gospel sermons is not the normative New Testament practice. Church meetings are for believers *only* and, specifically, for their spiritual edification and development – not for the purpose of converting the few pagans who might be present! This explains why there is such a strong emphasis in the pastoral epistles upon teaching or doctrine, since it would serve as the mainstay of the believer's diet and because it was necessary for their maturity (1 Timothy 4:13,16; 2 Timothy 2:2,24-25; Titus 1:9; Colossians 1:28). If we continuously focus our church meetings on converting the unbeliever, those who are already regenerate will not grow and learn the deeper truths of their faith. They will remain weak and stunted. God desires that we progress in our spiritual walk and grow in the deeper realities of the Christian life (Hebrews 5:11-14; 6:1-3).

One of the more ingenious tricks the Devil has played on us "conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist, Bible-believing Christians" has been to get us to confuse what we should be doing when we come together with what we should be doing when we go out into the world. We have been bedeviled into believing we should be "evangelizing" when we are together (when not more than five percent of those present are non-Christians). And, while "out there in the world," we are taught to be a "separated people," lest we become tainted by the influence of the ungodly should we associate with them too closely. Consequently, nearly every time he goes to church, the average evangelical Christian hears a simple evangelistic sermon designed to "convert the sinner" (who isn't there). While, "out in the world," he doesn't have three friends who are not Christians. No question about it. The Great Commission says, "Go ye into all the world and *bring them into the church building, so the pastor can preach the Gospel to every creature*" . . . In some weary hour, when we stop to face for an honest, fleeting moment the utter impossibility of thinking that the world could possibly be reached *inside* the church, we may even admit that if our members were winning people to Christ, as they ought to be, we might be able to minister differently. But they aren't and won't and can't – so we must go on as we are. We cannot figure out *why* they don't move past the baby stage into reproduction. The fact that they never get anything but milk from the pulpit and the church program somehow doesn't seem to our ecclesiastical mentality to be relevant to the problem. Is the purpose of the church, as it comes together, to win the lost? *Or do we have our church fellowship confused with our mission in the world?* In the first-century church, unbelievers became believers at gatherings of the believers, but that does not seem to be the purpose that brought them together. In Acts 2:42-47, the Lord added new converts to the church daily, but the reason for gathering together was so that those who were already believers could be taught by the apostles, enjoy spiritual fellowship with one another, remember the Lord's death and its benefits by sharing communion, and pray together . . . *Early church gatherings were for Christians to grow – not for evangelism.* Even though the modern evangelical mind cannot understand, their evangelism was as explosive as it was, in part, because their gatherings

were what they were . . . When the church comes together it is not to concentrate on converting the five percent who may have dropped in for the services, but it is to concentrate on the maturing, stabilizing, edifying, grounding, deepening, developing, effective living and ministering of its "in-group" believers. Its ministry is not to be aimed at building the biggest crowd possible, but at building believers (whatever their number) into a vital person-to-person fellowship of love – fellowship that really comes to "know" the Son of God . . . Today I see my ministry chiefly as a ministry to Christians. As an individual believer, I am as responsible to witness and win pagans as any other believer. But, as a pastor, my *first* responsibility is to teach and to structure the church so as to encourage the spiritual growth and maturity of believers until they become able to carry out their own evangelistic responsibilities (Robert C. Girard, *Brethren, Hang Loose* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972] pp.80-84).

Another reason why the church gathering should only be comprised of believers and why there is no mandate to constantly evangelize those in the assembly, is because Jeremiah 31:34 declares that those who are within the New Covenant community will no longer have to be urged to "know the Lord; for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, declares the Lord." To further support this, it must be remembered that all of that which is to transpire within a church meeting presupposes that the participants are believers (e.g., worship, celebration of the Lord's Supper, exercising of spiritual gifts, corporate prayer, etc.). Such exhortations to worship God and edify one another makes no sense if the church meeting was for unbelievers or even a mixed company of believers and pagans. Thus, church is for the church!

Recommended Reading:

David C. Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach?* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1996).

William Barlow, "Communicating the Gospel," [ed. Jon Zens] *Searching Together* (Vol.21:1-4, 1993) pp.45-61.

Kevin Craig, "Is the 'Sermon' Concept Biblical? A Study of Its Greek Origins," [ed. Jon Zens] *Searching Together* (Spring/Summer – 1986, Vol.15:1-2) pp.22-29.

Craig A. Evans, "'Preacher' and 'Preaching': Some Lexical Observations," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (December – 1981, Vol.24/No.4) pp.315-322.

"The hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions, but the willingness to submit every

**tradition, however ancient, to fresh Biblical scrutiny and, if
necessary, reform" (John Stott, "Basic Stott," *Christianity
Today*, Jan.8, 1996)**