



IX. The Strengths and Limits of the Pulpit

A strong pulpit has been a valuable asset in the post-Reformation church. There are excellent biographies of great Christian preachers. They are inspiring and convicting. They prayed much, owned enviable libraries of books they actually read, studied long, read in the original languages, wrote extensively, preached powerfully, and preached or read their lengthy messages from the pulpit. They did not preach brief, vacuous, crowd-pleasing, motivational talks. They preached the Word ... *really preached* the Word. Men and women responded to the Gospel ... a Gospel of faith alone in Christ alone. Moreover, they strongly exhorted men and women to walk in obedience and faith. The pre-Reformation church did not have a strong pulpit. It was not Word-focused. The Reformation was successful in redirecting the focus of the Church from the *altar* to the *Word*. The pre-Reformation Church kept the Word from the people ... virtually re-crucified Christ every Sunday ... presented a salvation by works ... and accentuated a superiority of a clergy separated from the laity. The Reformers changed much of that. They, and conservative church leaders to this day, put the Word in the hands of the people ... made the sacrament of communion to be a remembrance rather than a re-crucifixion ... and presented a non-works grace-only Gospel. Unfortunately, they continued to accentuate a superiority of a clergy distinctly separated from the laity. The Reformers sought to make the church Word-centric. However, in doing so, they also made it pulpit-centric. The medium of the pulpit is not only the vehicle for the message ... but in some ways, it is the message. Moreover, it can subjugate the message ... and it most often suppresses the propagation of the message. It is my hope that you are mentally processing these propositions ... and possibly are perplexed or disconcerted by them. They challenge the status quo. Please read on.

Today's church often strives to be successful in numbers, budgets, youth relevance, and seeker-friendliness. In this quest for success, pulpit ministry is marked by several significant limitations.

- I. Sunday messages (viewed in person, on television, or on-line) have little or no prerequisites. There is seldom any attempt at, or requirement for, hierarchal learning. Most pulpit messages are seldom more than entry-level freshman classes. Algebra 1 and English 1 are taught ... but Algebra 2 and English 2 are not. The cookies are kept on the bottom shelf so that everyone can reach them. However, no one is pulpit-led out of his or her freshman year (or with a few exceptional preachers, out of his or her sophomore year). It is not that many preachers cannot preach hierarchal, thought engaging, contextually complex, and content-filled messages ... they can. Nor is it that we in the pews cannot understand such messages ... we can. It is just that in many of today's churches we do not need to understand the Bible at an in-depth level. We only need to get to next Sunday reasonably unscathed by the perils of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

2. Today's pulpit messages contain nominal complexity and produce minimal perplexity. Pew people seldom get anything that challenges their understanding. Extended Biblical context is essentially unimportant to everyone except possibly the preacher. In many churches, pew people are challenged to take notes during the pulpit message. However, if they are only repeating freshman classes, how many times do they need to take notes? Such note taking reminds me of the new students at the London Centre scribbling down every word the great D.H.C. spoke ... straight from the horse's mouth into their notebooks (Huxley's *Brave New World*, chapter 1). Today, there is little truly expositional preaching. The meaning of *expositional* has devolved into little more than motivational preaching following a verse-by-verse or chapter-by-chapter path. Such messages do not demand engaged learning. They require little contextual reference ... little critical thinking ... little analysis of propositions ... little independent discovery ... and little Biblical discernment. Such messages do not really equip the saints for the work of service. They simply motivate the saints for another weekly visit to the pew.
3. Pulpit ministry in today's church often seems to be patterned after the television style of the daily news ... minimal information, sound bites, and entertainment to get people to come back for more of the same. Some have taken this to an extreme. However, do not simplistically blame the preachers. In many churches, if the preachers do not adequately entertain the people, the people will go to other churches, change channels, redirect their browsers, or multi-task (mentally or digitally) during the message to satisfy their hunger for emotional satisfaction. Today's preacher is challenged to be entertaining in order to fill the pews and collection plates on the way to building a more expansive campus ... or be judged by himself, his peers, and the people in the pews. Such a ministry goal seems to present a different Christianity altogether ... one that is comfortable, easy, and amusing ... one where most of our wants are satisfied but few of our needs are met. Might this new Christianity-lite sadly be a utopian *Brave New Church*?
4. The pulpit itself separates the clergy from the laity. Physically domineering Reformation pulpits made no pretense about it ... nor did later, somewhat smaller wooden pulpits. Today's clear plastic pulpits and sturdy teaching stands perched on raised platforms at the focal point of indoor amphitheatres continue the domination and separation. In addition, a podium-less wirelessly amplified preacher on the platform perpetuates the separation. A pulpit or a platform isn't necessarily wrong ... but it does elevate the clergy above, and separate them from, the laity. Did Jesus ever teach from behind a pulpit? Or did He often sit to teach as in Luke 5:3 & John 8:2?
5. The pulpit often suppresses the propagation of the message. It is seen as the center for fishing for men. The pew-people bring nonbelievers into the church goldfish bowl to be caught by the professional fisherman ... rather than personally taking the Gospel to them. Shouldn't we fish where the fish are ... rather than bringing them to the bait shop? Believers bring others to church. Disciples bring others to faith in Christ. The medium of the pulpit most often suppresses mass obedience to the Great Commission.

6. Good seminaries are fine institutions that turn believers into disciples in the process of equipping them to be ministry leaders. Unfortunately, the church seldom does that for laypeople. The pulpit is the focal point of church ministry ... proven by staff allocation, facilities, and budgets. In addition, the pulpit has proven that it most often does not or cannot produce disciples ... but only produces freshman believers. Many seminaries do a fine job. However, their weakness may be that they do not recognize the limits of the pulpit.

I expect that if you are still reading this, that you are processing my propositions. I hope that you are doing so ... analyzing them ... thinking critically ... and questioning their validity. You may have even gotten a little agitated by them. To illustrate my point, let me ask you this, *when was the last time that happened to you on a Sunday morning?*

You may wish to tell me something like this: *You don't understand today's church. Sunday morning messages have to be entertaining and short to keep people's attention. Moreover, the pews are filled with a wide variety of people. There are first-time visitors, regular attendees, entertainment hungry teens, non-believers, new believers, hurting believers, carnal believers, and aged saints. The preacher has to speak to everyone in one message from the pulpit.*" I agree completely ... but in thinking that, you have proven my point. Moreover, let me tell you that I do understand the challenge of the pulpit. I have been there and done that. The fact is that the medium of the pulpit subjugates the message and its propagation. The pulpit is medium-limited. The old saying was, *put the cookies on the bottom shelf so that everyone can reach them.* Maybe someone should put the cookies on the top shelf. If we cannot quite get them in our grasp, it may be time that we are stretched so that we can reach them. I do not write as a stranger to the church. For over five decades, I have participated in church services in the pew and in the pulpit. I have been at Bible conferences as attendee or speaker ... in Sunday school as student or teacher ... in prayer meetings, at mountain top retreats, in ministry board meetings, teaching Bible studies, and leading evangelist meetings. I have made disciples in obedience to the Great Commission. I have taught while sitting and preached standing in varied pulpits. In addition, I have again and again heard people express their frustration at hearing Algebra I and English I repeated again and again ... sometimes presented poorly and sometimes very well. Moreover, I am sure that I have offered my own freshman pulpit lectures. The fact is that the pulpit is limited ... especially in its capacity to actually make disciples.

Some warnings.

Your frustration with your church experience may be based on false expectations of what can be done from the pulpit. Highly skilled pulpit practitioners, and there are some, are still limited by their medium to presenting freshman and sophomore classes. If the best preacher in the world took over your pulpit, you might only become a more contented perpetual underclassman. Do you disagree that pulpit preaching is medium-limited to freshman level, or on rare occasions to sophomore level, context and content? Then can you tell me the subject *and* content of the messages preached from your real or virtual pulpit two months ago? What did you learn from it? Did you, or could you, teach someone else what you learned?

Is your church pulpit-centric? Answer these questions. Who is the highest paid staff person in your church? What portion of your church budget is committed to pulpit ministry? What meetings have the highest attendance? Does your church leadership equip and empower you for your ministry ... or do you just fund their ministry? If your church attendance is via the television, your web browser, or the radio, your church life is pulpit centric. If you attend a satellite church to watch a flat screen preacher, your church is pulpit centric. Which of these questions can you affirmatively answer? Do you semi-regularly attend Sunday morning pulpit services? Can you name someone that is discipling you ... or has disciplined you? Can you name someone that you are discipling? Your answers reveal something about your church and personal pulpit-centricity.

Christianity is best lived by disciples rather than by those who settle for being just believers. A ministry that is predominately pulpit-centric seldom produces disciples. What is missing in most churches, and in most Christians' lives, is a strong participation in the process of discipling. A disciple is more than a believer with the volume and intensity turned up ... can you verbalize the Biblical definition of a disciple? Part of being a disciple is abiding in His Word ... and that requires in-depth knowledge of it. Your life in the Body and in the world demands that you know, and abide in, the Word. What part of your Christian life requires your in-depth knowledge of the Word? Has your knowing the Word at an in-depth level seemingly become irrelevant in your church experience?

If reading this has made you think about trading in your pastor or attending a different church next Sunday, you could be missing the point. Maybe you should read this again. In addition, if reading this has tempted you to reject all pulpit ministries, you have definitely missed the point and should definitely read it again. There is a great need in today's church for solid Biblical pulpit ministry that believes that we are not looking for entertainment ... that understands we can comprehend complex Biblical truth ... that realizes we have a greater attention span than that required by a daily news broadcast ... and that sees us as more than pew-fodder. It is sadly true that today many Christians suffer because of weak pulpit ministries. However, their greatest need is not for a stronger pulpit. Their greatest need is for involvement in becoming a disciple and a discipler. Get involved in the process of discipling. Become a disciple. Make a disciple. Seek out a strong pulpit ministry ... but do not be pulpit-centric. Be Great Commission centric.

Addendum ... A Disciple in the Local Church

Jesus said, "*I will build My church,*" Matthew 16:18. The Great Commission is not *Go therefore and make churches* ... but rather, "*Go therefore and make disciples.*" Jesus builds His church in the wake of our making disciples. A Christ-honoring local church gathering is a manifestation of His church. It can be a wonderful place where God is worshipped ... where communion is celebrated ... where the Word is publicly read, taught, and preached ... where baptisms, marriages, and funerals are performed ... where believers of all generations fellowship together ... and where the Gospel is proclaimed. However, the church building is not the replacement of the Old Testament Tabernacle. The church is His body ... not His building. "*Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant ... but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house – whose house we are,*" Hebrews 3:5-6.

Local gatherings of the first century church were much different from those of today. Christians were severely persecuted and frequently martyred. Their gatherings were considered heretical and illegal. Therefore, their constituency was more disciple-like than that of the local church today. Church gatherings today contain a more diverse group of people. The more a local church is seeker friendly, the more non-believers are in their midst. Today's pulpit ministries are often more culturally acceptable to attract more people to the Gospel. Therefore, the teaching of the Word in those situations can be weaker. However, some pulpit ministries are strong. They declare the uncompromised truth of the Word and effectively proclaim the Gospel. They have not been squeezed into the world's mold. They are rooted in sound doctrine and do not subvert the truth to build attendance. They are not tickling the ears of those who attend their gatherings. They know that the boathouse is not the boat. They understand the strengths of a sound pulpit ministry ... and they recognize its limits.

Non-believers, new believers, immature believers, and even carnal believers can find acceptance and comfort in many of today's local church gatherings. However, many serious believers sense that something is missing. Some turn to media ministers to get stronger teaching. Some seek a new church gathering or fight for change. Many serious believers are simply dropping out. However, the solution may be to switch their focus away from the pulpit ministry to their own ministry as a disciple and disciplemaker. Today's church gathering is a great place to lock onto a seeker ... to help that person come to faith in Christ. It can be a place to help a new believer begin to grow into a disciple. It can be a place of witnessing and disciplemaking opportunities. It may be time to switch their expectations away from what they personally take away from the boathouse to what they give to the boat.

Local gatherings of the church should be strong and pure. Heresy, doctrinal error, and leadership impurity should not be tolerated. Pulpit ministry should be more than a talk loosely connected to a verse. A strong pulpit is good and needed. However, it is still limited. Church is an integrated multi-generational Body. Seek gatherings that recognize that in content and worship. Being an active participant in such church gatherings is important. However, finding such gatherings can be extremely difficult. If you are part of a wonderful one, rejoice and be glad. If you are not, be very cautious. Don't just drop out. Be a functioning part of the Body. Do your best to find a Christ-honoring gathering of the church. And whatever you do, be boat centric rather than boathouse centric. Become equipped to be a disciple, a disciplemaker, and a witness. It may or may not be time to make a church gathering change ... or a pulpit change. However, doing so may not fix anything. Maybe you need to lower your expectations of the pulpit ... and raise your expectations of life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

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