

## **Preachers: God's Way, or Man's?**

*The sower went out to sow...Matthew 13:3*

When God tried to persuade Moses to go and preach to His people, Moses resisted. Even after a lengthy show-and-tell, he finally told God, "please send someone else to do it." (Exo 4:13) Isaiah responded to God's call by saying, "send me," but only after being cleansed of his personal sin (Isa 6:5-8). Even the apostles were not looking to be called during a time when various messiahs scoured the lands of Galilee.

In today's church, there are men who chomp at the bit at being God's spokesman. Not only do they see themselves as "qualified" for the position, but humility is generally not their strong suit. In my personal experience, arrogance rules most in men's hearts.

Because of personal ego, the pulpit is the most dangerous place in the church. It seems that in congregations where there is no full-time preacher, everyone wants a shot at the pulpit but not many want to be the song leader. Thirty years ago, I thought I was a hotshot preacher. Today, I look back on those sermons with shame. Young men mistake enthusiasm for "being full of the Holy Spirit." Their fiery desire is interpreted as a "calling from God to the pulpit." Mostly, it's just an old-fashioned ego trip.

You may be thinking, who cares? As long as the truth is getting out, why should I judge other men's motives? To which I reply, *God never designed the church to be a place where one man was to be a figurehead in ANY ecclesiastical position.*

Because of the importance placed on the preacher by most today, it would do us well to see what God has to say on the subject.

### ***Spiritual Pragmatism***

In the parable of the Seed and the Sower, the emphasis is placed on the Word of God, not the person doing the planting. Jesus said, "A sower went out to sow..." and that is the sum total of the preacher's job. The remainder of the parable deals with the effects of the planted word in various situations. Jesus' parable is clear: it is not the preaching *method* that concerns God.

In today's church, there is little-to-no effort at getting spiritually fit. A heavy dependence on the Sunday morning sermon has become the only source of spiritual food for most. As such, the desire in having a full-time preacher is top priority on most church's list. The reason for this is because of our pursuit of materialism and entertainment—there just isn't time for God in the home anymore. The fix? Hire someone to deliver the manna from heaven and make sure you don't miss the assembly times.

When a church worries about dwindling attendance, oftentimes they think it has to do with the *style* of preaching. They look for the “right man” to “lead” the worship service. If the numbers start going up, someone inevitably wants to package it up and then write a book on how to do it. Books such as *Zip to 3000 in 5 Years* by John Wimber reveal to churches the success formula for congregational growth.

This is not to downplay the importance of preaching. Paul wrote, “How can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Rom 10:14-15) NIV

### ***What Does the Bible Say?***

Most preachers use Paul’s words to justify their importance in the church. However, as in the parable of the sower, the context refers to preaching to *unbelievers*, not churchgoers. In fact, the NT places little importance on preachers as far as church organization goes. God is concerned with the qualification and placement of elders and deacons (1 Tim 3:1ff; Titus 1:5ff), not preachers.

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor,  
*especially those whose work is preaching and teaching* (1 Tim 5:17).

Preaching and teaching, according to Paul is a job designed for elders. However, elders and deacons today have delegated oversight, preaching, teaching, marriage counseling, and other matters to one man. They concern themselves with church budgets and other trivial matters instead of watching over the flock. In his article, *A Different Gospel*, Terry Gardner writes, “Remove the money and keys to the building from the Eldership and what does it do? Not much. Elders should be SPIRITUAL shepherds and leaders. They have no right to be a financial board.”<sup>1</sup>

Rarely do we see an elder preaching today. Enormous expense and investment is spent, not on qualifying someone to be an elder, but on how to preach. Bible colleges crank out preachers, not elders. Doctrinal degrees are awarded to preachers, not elders. “Ordained” preachers, not elders, conduct all weddings, funerals, and sometimes baptisms. God has determined that elders would shepherd the flock, but time and money is invested into the man up front.

Timothy and Titus were told to appoint elders in every city, not preachers. The elders were to be “entrusted with God’s work,” holding “firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:7-9). Their purpose is stated in verse 10: “For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers.”

Paul admonished the elders at Ephesus to “be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theexaminer.org/volume1/number1/gospel.htm>

among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” (Acts 20:28-30)

This is a far cry from the focus of today’s elders, who are more concerned with getting parishioners in their seats on time, and following up on Sunday morning no-shows. Instead of protecting the flock from false teachers, they have relegated the dispensation of truth to a dedicated preacher. Not an elder today would agree with this conclusion, as they all consider themselves able and ready to combat any Mormon or JW who dares enter the assembly. When did their responsibility begin and end with the “magic hour” of worship?

Some preachers claim that since Timothy was an evangelist who appointed the elders, it is the preacher (i.e., evangelist) who leads, not elders. However, Timothy was an evangelist through the laying on Paul’s hands (2 Tim 1:6). What apostle laid hands on your preacher? Spiritual gifts could only be imparted by the original 12 apostles (Acts 8:18). Secondly, the gift was *confirmed* by the elders (1 Tim 4:14). In other words, the gift came miraculously, as did other gifts (Eph 4:11), and it was agreed upon by the elders that Timothy should be an evangelist.

One can claim the office and work of an evangelist, but only in a *provisional* sense, not a judicial one. There’s no way to verify that God appointed your preacher, even if the elders agreed that the man should be an evangelist and laid their hands on him. Instead, the appointment comes from a bible college pedigree.

According to Ephesians 4, Christ *gave* gifts to men. He *gave* some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers. He is not still *giving* these gifts, since their whole purpose was to bring the written revelation of God’s will to mankind. Their job was temporary, “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.” (Eph 4:12-13)

The phrase, “until we all reach unity in the faith” implies a limited time that these gifts were to be in use. Paul is not saying that “we need evangelists until everyone agrees on the same points of doctrine,” since that is impossible. The remainder of the chapter gives us the reason for the revealed word given by those appointed: *to guard against false doctrine*. How can one know the truth of salvation? By looking at the word of God.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul said that certain gifts were to be around until the ‘perfect’ came. The gifts he mentions are prophesying, speaking in tongues, and knowledge. All relate to learning and speaking God’s word. He called these gifts temporary, or partial. The ‘perfect’ (or ‘complete’) refers to God’s word and points back to the three gifts of knowledge, prophecy and tongues. Today, we have attempted to keep those gifts alive and narrowly confine them to individuals who have the associated skills. This is a false assumption. All Christians are to know God’s will, preaching the gospel to “all nations,” as Jesus commanded in His Great Commission.

Secondly, Paul describes the collective assembly as having multiple speakers, not one man running the whole show. Prophecy was essentially “speaking for God,” and included “edification, exhortation, and consolation” (1 Cor 14:3). A preacher edifies, exhorts and consoles

the flock; he can be rightly called a prophet. When Paul said, "I would rather have you prophesy" (1 Cor 14:5), he was addressing the congregation, not one particular person. In fact, he implies that the early church had several that preached:

Two or three prophets (preachers) should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. (1 Cor 14:29-31) NIV

This is a far cry from today's church organization, where only certain men are allowed to preach. In fact, I've been told by more than one preacher, "I don't believe in 'sharing' the pulpit." Another once announced in a sermon, "If you don't have a college degree, you have no business preaching."

Men will point to the various gifts outlined in 1 Corinthians 12, claiming their heritage to preach. They also point to the command to "do all things decently and in order." So while great emphasis is placed on the preacher, they forget that "our presentable parts need no special treatment" (1 Cor 12:24).

The Holy Spirit makes it clear that elders, not a full-time paid preacher, are to be in charge of the congregation. In opposition to the Spirit, churches have installed a man in the pulpit who wears a nice suit, has a divinity degree, has smooth delivery skills, and is paid to "feed the flock." Terry Gardner writes,

Institutionalism occurs when Christians allow any institution or person to do what they as individual Christians should do. For example, if by supporting a preacher I feel that my responsibility to teach, pray, visit and think is thus discharged, then I've institutionalized the preacher. As a result of this kind of thinking we have institutionalized the elders, preacher and church to the point that members are responsible for nothing...except to give and attend three times per week.

When the issue came up to start paying me as a preacher, there was immediate direction placed on me to visit the sick and the backsliders. Scripture says that all Christians must do this, not just the preacher. Christians are to be devoted to one another and honor one another above themselves (Rom 12:10), sing to one another (Eph 5:19), confess their sins to one another (James 5:16), and serve, submit, and love one another. It is a corporate responsibility, not one restricted to a single office.

Most preachers do take on themselves the task of carrying the whole load. They do all the sermons, teach the classes, visit the strays, dress better than everyone else, and adhere to a higher standard than is expected of the rest of the flock. While Joe Blow can be winked at for slipping into the local pub, a preacher faces possible termination for the same act. To quote James, "my brethren, these things ought not to be this way." (James 3:10)

## ***The Heart of Man***

We should be thankful for men who carry heavy burdens while most of the congregation sits idly by. Yet it is the *importance* placed on the preacher that contradicts scripture. He is looked on as the overseer when the NT clearly says that elders are to watch over the congregation. Church web sites are devoted to what the preacher has to say. Christian radio shows are centralized around the preacher's fare. Preachers, not clergymen, write books. Signs in front of church buildings and Yellow Page ads typically advertise the name of the preacher.

All of this underscores faith in a man, not on Christ and His Word. While we condemn the Catholics, who regard the Pope as their authority figure, we too give such status to a man. When that happens, the danger of false doctrine increases. Unlike the Bereans, who "received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day *to see if what Paul said was true*" (Acts 17:11) today's Christians lack the enthusiasm and scriptural knowledge. The Bereans didn't just accept Paul's teaching due to his status as an apostle; they verified what he told them by checking the scriptures. To question the preacher on something he said is considered in very bad taste today.

The New Testament warns against false teachers more than any other topic.<sup>2</sup> Paul said that from within the church "men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." (Acts 20:30) When John wrote, "they went out from us..." (1 John 2:19), he is saying that false messiahs originated from within the church.

Few preachers would admit they are out to deceive people. Yet John wrote, "Many deceivers (not just a few), who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world" (2 John 7). Although John was referring primarily to Gnosticism, today's denial of Christ comes in the form of watered-down sermons that contain little scripture and a lot of humanistic ingredients. They don't acknowledge Jesus Christ. He is not part of the conversation. He is ignored and replaced by something else.

John wrote that it was doctrine, not feelings that determine our salvation (2 John 7-10). In our Christian pop culture, where emotions and ambience are exalted above God's word, many disregard these warnings. Christian radio and television is full of programming that never mentions Jesus Christ, and replaces God's word with human psychology. Their hosts invariably carry "doctor" or "professor" as part of their title to give reassurance to the listener that they know what they're talking about. Says the apostle Paul,

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (1 Cor 2:2-5).

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, Christian living is the Number One NT subject, while false teachers and their doctrines are second.

There would not be a congregation today that would allow Paul to preach. If the apostle got on the air waves “in weakness, fear and much trembling,” and in unimpressive words, listeners would turn off their radios. If Jesus came to America and selected janitors and Burger King employees as apostles, our educated religious leaders would laugh at them.

God chose Moses, who evidently had a speech impediment (Exo 4:10), although Stephen testified that Moses was “mighty in words and deeds” (Acts 7:22). When Amos, a lowly shepherd, went to the “king’s church” to preach, they told him to get out (Amos 7:12-13). Jesus’ apostles were not “educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law” (Acts 22:3).

Jesus was a “carpenter’s son” who came to teach in His hometown of Nazareth. Scripture says “they took offense at him” (Matt 13:57) because of His common background.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he told our Lord, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” In reply, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” (John 3:2-3) NIV

Jesus never responds to Nicodemus’ appraisal, but delivers what is needed: the truth. Too many preachers draw attention to themselves in subtle ways. They may waste time on introductions, stories, and other extraneous compost instead of “preaching Christ crucified.” Their followers may seek to publicly praise them for great things they may have done. Even though the praise may be justified, it exalts a man, not Christ, who alone will do the exalting on that Day.

In the parable of the sower, nothing is said of the sower and everything is said about the word. Today, all emphasis is on the sower—his training, attire, delivery, his wife and children—and little attention is given to the word. Like the Gnostics, who brought popular philosophy into the church and mixed it with the Truth, today’s preachers bring in worldly notions that have gradually watered-down the gospel message. As a result, parishioners themselves have become watered down.

Like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, who loved the “greetings in the marketplaces” (Luke 11:43), men wear distinctive garb, collars, and crucifix chains to draw attention to themselves. Jesus warned, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.” (Luke 6:26)

The OT false prophets led Israel astray by telling them everything was OK...not to worry about any judgments from God (Jer 6:14; Ezek 13:10, 16). Today’s preachers are guilty of the same thing. They tell funny stories and preach sermons designed to stimulate the emotions rather than point a person towards repentance.

If there are shoeshine boys in heaven, I fear that most of those jobs will be given to preachers who thought they had done great things for God.

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