

THE SERMON:

PROTESTANTISM'S MOST SACRED COW

Chapter 4

“Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it.”

--Will Durant, Twentieth-Century American Historian

“And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

--Paul of Tarsus in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5

WE NOW COME TO ONE OF THE MOST SACROSANCT CHURCH PRACTICES OF ALL: THE SERMON. Remove the sermon and the Protestant order of worship becomes in large part a songfest. Remove the sermon and attendance at the Sunday morning service is doomed to drop.

The sermon is the bedrock of the Protestant liturgy. For five hundred years, it has functioned like clockwork. Every Sunday morning, the pastor steps up to his pulpit and delivers an inspirational oration to a passive, pew-warming audience. So central is the sermon that it is the very reason many Christians go to church. In fact, the entire service is often judged by the quality of the sermon. Ask a person how church was last Sunday and you will most likely get a description of the message. In short, the contemporary Christian mind-set often equates the sermon with Sunday morning worship. But it does not end there.

Remove the sermon and you have eliminated the most important source of spiritual nourishment for countless numbers of believers (so it is thought). Yet the stunning reality is that today's sermon has no root in Scripture. Rather, it was borrowed from pagan culture, nursed and adopted into the Christian faith. That's a startling statement, is it not? But there is more.

The sermon actually detracts from the very purpose for which God designed the church gathering. And it has very little to do with genuine spiritual growth. Don't faint dead away...we will prove these words in the following pages.

THE SERMON AND THE BIBLE

Doubtlessly, someone reading the previous few paragraphs will retort: “People preached all throughout the Bible. Of course, the sermon is scriptural!”

Granted, the Scriptures do record men and women preaching. However, there is a world of difference between the Spirit-inspired preaching and teaching described in the Bible and the contemporary sermon. This difference is virtually always overlooked because we have been unwittingly conditioned to read our modern-day practices back into the Scripture. So, we mistakenly embrace today’s pulpiterism as being biblical. Let’s unfold that a bit. The present-day Christian sermon has the following features.

- **It is a regular occurrence** – delivered faithfully from the pulpit at least once a week.
- **It is delivered by the same person**-usually the pastor or an ordained guest speaker.
- **It is delivered to a passive audience**-essentially; it is a monologue.
- **It is a cultivated form of speech**-possessing a specific structure. It typically contains an introduction, three to five points, and a conclusion.

Contrast this with the kind of preaching mentioned in the Bible. In the Old Testament, men of God preached and taught. But their speaking did not map to the contemporary sermon. Here are the features of Old Testament preaching and teaching.

- Active participation and interruptions by the audience were common.
- Prophets and priests spoke extemporaneously and out of a present burden, rather than from a set script.
- There is no indication that Old Testament prophets or priests gave regular speeches to God's people. Instead, the nature of Old Testament preaching was sporadic, fluid and open for audience participation. Preaching in the ancient synagogue followed a similar pattern.

Come now to the New Testament. The Lord Jesus did not preach a regular sermon to the same audience. His preaching and teaching took many different forms. And He delivered His messages to many different audiences. (Of course, He concentrated most of His teaching on His disciples. Yet the messages He brought to them were consistently spontaneous and informal.)

Following the same pattern, the apostolic preaching recorded in Acts possessed the following features.

- It was sporadic.
- It was delivered on special occasions in order to deal with specific problems.
- It was extemporaneous and with rhetorical structure.
- It was most often dialogical (meaning it included feedback and interruptions from the audience) rather than monological (a one-way discourse).

In like manner, the New Testament letters show that the ministry of God's Word came from the entire church in their regular gatherings. From Romans 12:6-8, 15:14, 1 Corinthians 14:26-5, and Colosians 3:16, we see that it included teaching, exhortation, prophecy, singing, and admonishment. This "every-member" functioning was also conversational (1 Corinthians 14:29) and marked by interruptions (1 Corinthians 14:30) Equally so, the exhortations of the local elders were normally impromptu.

In short, the contemporary sermon delivered for Christian consumption is foreign to both Old and New Testaments. There is nothing in Scripture to indicate its existence in the early Christian gatherings.

WHERE DID THE CHRISTIAN SERMON COME FROM

The earliest recorded Christian source for regular sermonizing is found during the late second century. Clement of Alexandria lamented the fact that sermons did so little to change Christians. Yet despite its recognized failure, the sermon became a standard practice among believers by the fourth century.

This raises a thorny question. If the first-century Christians were not noted for their sermonizing, from whom did the postapostolic Christians pick it up? The answer is telling: The Christian sermon was borrowed from the pagan pool of Greek culture!

To find the heard waters of the sermon, we must go back to the fifth century BC and a group of wandering teachers called sophists. The sophists are credited for inventing rhetoric (the art of persuasive speaking). They recruited disciples and demanded payment for delivering their orations.

The sophists were expert debaters. They were masters at using emotional appeals, physical appearance, and clever language to “sell” their arguments. In time, the style, form, and oratorical skill of the sophists became more prized than their accuracy. This spawned a class of men who became masters of fine phrases, “cultivating style for style’s sake.” The truths they preached were abstract rather than truths that were practiced in their own lives. They were experts at imitating form rather than substance.

The sophists identified themselves by the special clothing they wore. Some of them had a fixed residence where they gave regular sermons to the same audience. Others traveled to deliver their polished orations. (they made a good deal of money when they did.) Sometimes the Greek orator would enter his speaking forum “already robed in his pulpit-gown.” He would then mount the steps to his professional chair to sit before he brought his sermon.

To make his points, he would quote Homer’s verses. (some orators studied Homer so well that they could repeat him by heart.) So spellbinding was the sophist that he would often incite his audience to clap their hands during his discourse. If his speaking was very well received, some would call his sermon “inspired.”

The sophists were the most distinguished men of their time. Some even lived at public expense. Others had public statues erected in their honor.

About a century later, the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) gave to rhetoric the three-point speech. "A whole," said Aristotle, "must have a beginning, a middle, and an end." In time, Greek orators implemented Aristotle's three-point principle into their discourses.

The Greeks were intoxicated with rhetoric. So the sophists fared well. When the Romans took over Greece, they too became obsessed with rhetoric. Consequently, Greco-Roman culture developed an insatiable appetite for hearing someone give an eloquent oration. This was so fashionable that a "sermonette" from a professional philosopher after dinner was a regular form of entertainment.

The ancient Greeks and Romans viewed rhetoric as one of the greatest forms of art. Accordingly, the orators in the Roman Empire were lauded with the same glamorous status that Americans assign to movie stars and professional athletes. They were the shining stars of their day.

Orators could bring a crowd to a frenzy simply by their powerful speaking skills. Teachers of rhetoric, the leading science of the era, were the pride of every major city. The orators they produced were given celebrity status. In short, the Greeks and Romans were addicted to the pagan sermon-just as many contemporary Christians are addicted to the "Christian" sermon.

THE ARRIVAL OF A POLLUTED STREAM

How did the Greek sermon find its way into the Christian church? Around the third century a vacuum was created when mutual ministry faded from the body of Christ. At this time the last of the traveling Christian workers who spoke out of a prophetic burden and spontaneous conviction left the pages of church history. To fill their absence, the clergy began to emerge. Open meetings began to die out, and church gatherings became more and more liturgical. The “church meeting” was devolving into a “service.”

As a hierarchical structure began to take root, the idea of a “religious specialist” emerged. In the face of these changes, the functioning Christians had trouble fitting into this evolving ecclesiastical structure. There was no place for them to exercise their gifts. By the fourth century, the church had become fully institutionalized.

As this was happening, many pagan orators and philosophers were becoming Christians. As a result, pagan philosophical ideas unwittingly made their way into the Christian community. Many of these men became the theologians and leaders of the early Christian church. They are known as the “church fathers,” and some of their writings are still with us.

Thus the pagan notion of a trained professional speaker who delivers orations for a fee moved straight into the Christian bloodstream. Note that the concept of the “paid teaching specialist” came from Greece, not Judaism. It was the custom of Jewish rabbis to take up a trade so as to not charge a fee for their teaching.

The upshot of the story is that these former pagan orators (now turned Christian) began to use their Greco-Roman oratorical skills for Christian purposes. They would sit in their official chair and “expound the sacred text of Scripture, just as the sophist would supply an exegesis of the near-sacred text of Homer.” If you compare a third-century pagan sermon with a sermon given by one of the church fathers, you will find both the structure and the phraseology to be quite similar.

So a new style of communication was being birthed in the Christian church—a style that emphasized polished rhetoric, sophisticated grammar, flowery eloquence, a monologue. It was a style that was designed to entertain and show off the speaker’s oratorical skills. It was Greco-Roman rhetoric. And only those who were trained in it were allowed to address the assembly! (Does any of this sound familiar?)

One scholar put it this way: “The original proclamation of the Christian message was a two-way conversation but when the oratorical schools of the Western world laid hold of the Christian message, they made Christian preaching something vastly different. Oratory tended to take the place of conversation. The greatness of the orator took the place of the astounding event of Jesus Christ. And the dialogue between speaker and listener faded into a monologue.

In a word, the Greco-Roman sermon replaced prophesying, open sharing, and Spirit-inspired teaching. The sermon became the elitist privilege of church officials, particularly the bishops. Such people had to be educated in the schools of rhetoric to learn how to speak. Without this education, a Christian was not permitted to address God's people.

As early as the third century, Christians called their sermons homilies, the same term Greek orators used for their discourses. Today, one can take a seminary course called homiletics to learn how to preach. Homiletics is considered a "science, applying rules of rhetoric, which go back to Greece and Rome.

Put another way, neither homilies (sermons) nor homiletics (the art of sermonizing) have a Christian origin. They were stolen from the pagans. A polluted stream made its entrance into the Christian faith and muddied its waters. And that stream flows just as strongly today as it did in the fourth century.

CHRYSOSTOM AND AUGUSTINE

John Chrysostom was one of the greatest Christian orators of his day. (Chrysostom means “golden-mouthed.”) Never had Constantinople heard “sermons so powerful, brilliant, and frank” as those preached by Chrysostom. Chrysostom’s preaching was so compelling that people would sometimes shove their way toward the front to hear him better.

Naturally endowed with the orator’s gift of gab, Chrysostom learned how to speak under the leading sophist of the fourth century, Libanius, Chrysostom’s pulpit eloquence was unsurpassed. So powerful were his orations that his sermons would often get interrupted by congregational applause. Chrysostom once gave a sermon condemning the applause as unfitting in God’s house. But the congregation loved the sermon so much that after he finished preaching, they applauded anyway. This story illustrates the untamable power of Greek rhetoric.

We can credit both Chrysostom and Augustine (354-430), a former professor of rhetoric, for making pulpit oratory part and parcel of the Christian faith. In Chrysostom, the Greek sermon reached its zenith. The Greek sermon style indulged in rhetorical brilliance, the quoting of poems, and focused on impressing the audience. Chrysostom emphasized that “the preacher must toil long on his sermons in order to gain the power of eloquence.

In Augustine, the Latin sermon reached its heights. The Latin sermon style was more down to earth than the Greek style. It focused on the “common man” and was directed to a simpler moral point. Zwingli took John Chrysostom as his model in preaching, while Luther took Augustine as his model. Both Latin and Greek styles included a verse-by-verse commentary form as well as a paraphrasing form.

Even so, Chrysostom and Augustine stood in the lineage of the Greek sophists. They gave us polished Christian rhetoric. They gave us the “Christian” sermon: biblical in content, but Greek in style.

THE REFORMERS, THE PURITANS, AND THE GREAT AWAKENING

During medieval times, the Eucharist dominated the Roman Catholic Mass, and preaching took a backseat. But with the coming of Martin Luther, the sermon was again given prominence in the worship service. Luther viewed the church as the gathering of those who listen to the Word of God being spoken to them. For this reason, he once called the church building a Mundhaus (mouth-house or speech-house)!

Taking his cue from Luther, John Calvin argued that the preacher is the “mouth of God.” (Ironically, both men vehemently railed against the idea that the pope was a vicar of Christ.) It is not surprising that many of the Reformers had studied rhetoric and were deeply influenced by the Greco-Roman sermons of Augustine, Chrysostom, Origen, and Gregory the Great.

Thus the flaws of the church fathers were duplicated by the Reformers and the Protestant subcultures that were created by them. This was especially true of the Puritans. In fact, the contemporary evangelical preaching tradition finds its most recent roots in the Puritan movement of the seventeenth century and the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century.

The Puritans borrowed their preaching method from Calvin. What was that method? It was a systematic exposition of Scripture week after week. It was a method taken from the early church fathers that became popular during the Renaissance. Renaissance scholars would provide a sentence-by-sentence commentary on a writing from classical antiquity. Calvin was a master at this form. Before his conversion, he employed this style while writing a commentary on a work by the pagan author Seneca. When he was converted and turned to sermonizing, he applied the same analytical style to the Bible.

Following the path of John Calvin, the Puritans centered all their church services around a systematic teaching of the Bible. As they sought to Protestantize England (purifying it from the flaws of Anglicanism), the Puritans centered all of their church services around highly structured, methodical, logical, verse-by-verse expositions of Scripture. They stressed that Protestantism was a religion of “the Book.” (Ironically, “the Book” knows nothing of this type of sermon.)

The Puritans also invented a form of preaching called “plain-style.” This style was rooted in the memorization of sermon notes. Their dividing, subdividing, and analyzing of a biblical text raised the sermon to a fine science. This form is still used today by countless pastors. In addition, the Puritans gave us the one-hour sermon (though some Puritan sermons lasted ninety minutes), the practice of congregants taking notes on the sermon, the tidy four-part sermon outline, and the pastor’s use of crib notes while delivering his oration.

Another influence, the Great Awakening, is responsible for the kind of preaching that was common in early Methodist churches and is still used in contemporary Pentecostal churches. Strong outbursts of emotion, which include screaming and running up and down the platform, are all carryovers from this tradition.

Summing up the origin of the contemporary sermon, we can say the following: Christianity had taken Greco—Roman rhetoric and adapted it for its own purposes, baptized it, and wrapped it in swaddling clothes. The Greek homily made its way into the Christian church around the second century. It reached its height in the pulpit orators of the fourth century—namely Chrysostom and Augustine.

The Christian sermon lost its prominence from the fifth century until the Reformation, when it became encased and enshrined as the central focus of the Protestant worship service. Yet for the last five centuries, most Christians have never questioned its origin or its effectiveness.

HOW SERMONIZING HARMS THE CHURCH

Though revered for five centuries, the conventional sermon has negatively impacted the church in a number of ways.

First, the sermon makes the preacher the virtuoso performer of the regular church gathering. As a result, congregational participation is hampered at best and precluded at worst. The sermon turns the church into a preaching station. The congregation degenerates into a group of muted spectators who watch a performance. There is not room for interrupting or questioning the preacher while he is delivering his discourse. The sermon freezes and imprisons the functioning of the body of Christ. It fosters a docile priesthood by allowing pulpiteers to dominate the church gathering week after week.

Second, the sermon often stalemates spiritual growth. Because it is a one-way affair, it encourages passivity. The sermon prevents the church from functioning as intended. It suffocates mutual ministry. It smothers open participation. This causes the spiritual growth of God's people to take a nosedive.

As Christians, we must function if we are to mature (see Mark 4:24-25 and Hebrews 10:24-25). We do not grow by passive listening week after week. In fact, one of the goals of new Testament-styled preaching and teaching is to get each of us to function (Ephesians 4:11-16). It is to encourage us to open our mouths in the church meeting (1 Corinthians 12-14). The conventional sermon hinders this very process.

Third, the sermon preserves the unbiblical clergy mentality. It creates an excessive and pathological dependence on the clergy. The sermon makes the preacher the religious specialist-the only one having anything worthy to say. Everyone else is treated as a second-class Christian-a silent pew warmer. (While this is not usually voiced, it is the unspoken reality.)

How can the pastor learn from the other members of the body of Christ when they are muted? How can the church learn fully from the pastor when its members cannot ask him questions during his oration? How can the brothers and sisters learn from one another if they are prevented from speaking in the meetings?

The sermon makes “church” both distant and impersonal. It deprives the pastor of receiving spiritual sustenance from the church. And it deprives the church of receiving spiritual nourishment from one another. For these reasons, the sermon is one of the biggest road blocks to a functioning priesthood.

Fourth, rather than equipping the saints, the sermon de-skills them. It matters not how loudly ministers drone on about “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry,” the truth is that the contemporary sermon preached every week has little power to equip God’s people for spiritual service and functioning. Unfortunately, however, many of God’s people are just as addicted to hearing sermons as many preachers are addicted to preaching them. By contrast, New Testament-styled preaching and teaching equips the church so that it can function without the presence of a clergyman.

For instance, I (Frank) recently attended a conference where a contemporary church planter spent an entire weekend with a network of house churches. Each day, the church planter submerged the churches in a revelation of Jesus Christ. But he also gave them very practical instruction on how to experience what he preached. He then left them on their own, and he probably will not return for months. The churches, having been equipped that weekend, have been having their own meetings where every member has contributed something of Christ in the gathering through exhortations, encouragements, teachings, testimonies, writing new songs, poems, etc. This is essentially New Testament apostolic ministry.

Fifth, today’s sermon is often impractical. Countless preachers speak as experts on that which they have never experienced. Whether it be abstract/theoretical, devotional/inspirational, demanding/compelling, or entertaining/amusing, the sermon fails to put the hearers into a direct, practical experience of what has been preached. Thus, the typical sermon is a swimming lesson on dry land! It lacks any practical value. Much is preached, but little ever lands. Most of it is aimed at the frontal lobe. Contemporary pulpiterism generally fails to get beyond disseminating information and on the equipping believers to experience and use that which they have heard

In this regard, the sermon mirrors its true father-Greco Roman rhetoric. Greco-Roman rhetoric was bathed in abstraction. It “involved forms designed to entertain and display genius rather than instruct or develop talents in others.” The contemporary polished sermon can warm the heart, inspire the will, and stimulate the mind. But it rarely if ever shows the team how to leave the huddle. In all of these ways, the contemporary sermon fails to meet its billing at promoting the kind of spiritual growth it promises. In the end, it actually intensifies the impoverishment of the church. The sermon acts like a momentary stimulant. Its effects are often short-lived.

Let’s be honest. There are scores of Christians who have been sermonized for decades, and they are still babes in Christ. We Christians are not transformed simply by hearing sermons week after week. We are transformed by regular encounters with the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who minister, therefore, are called to preach Christ and not information about Him. They are also called to make their ministry intensely practical. They are called not only to reveal Christ by the spoken word, but to show their hearers how to experience, know, follow, and serve Him. The contemporary sermon too often lacks these all-important elements.

If a preacher cannot bring his hearers into a living spiritual experience of that which he is ministering, the results of his message will be short-lived. Therefore, the church needs fewer pulpiteers and more spiritual facilitators. It is in dire need of those who can proclaim Christ and know how to deploy God's people to experience Him who has been preached. And on top of that, Christians need instruction on how to share this living Christ with the rest of the church for their mutual edification.

Consequently, the Christian family needs a restoration of the biblical practice of mutual exhortation and mutual ministry. For the new Testament hinges spiritual transformation upon these two things. Granted, the gift of teaching is present in the church. But teaching is to come from all the believers (1 Corinthians 14:26, 31) as well as from those who are specially gifted to teach (Ephesians 4:11, James 3:1). We move far outside of biblical bounds when we allow teaching to take the form of a conventional sermon and relegate it to a class of professional orators.

WRAPPING IT UP

Is preaching and teaching the Word of God scriptural? Yes, absolutely. But the contemporary pulpit sermon is not the equivalent of the preaching and teaching that is found in the Scriptures. It cannot be found in the Judaism of the Old Testament, the ministry of Jesus, or the life of the primitive church. What is more, Paul told his Greek converts that he refused to be influenced by the communication patterns of his pagan contemporaries (1 Corinthians 1:17, 22; 2:1-5).

But what about 1 Corinthians 9:22-23 (NLT), where Paul says, “I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some”? We would argue that this would not include making a weekly sermon the focus of all worship gatherings, which would have stifled the believers’ transformation and mutual edification.

The sermon was conceived in the womb of Greek rhetoric. It was born into the Christian community when pagans-turned-Christians began to bring their oratorical styles of speaking into the church. By the third century, it became common for Christian leaders to deliver a sermon. By the fourth century it became the norm.

Christianity has absorbed its surrounding culture. When your pastor mounts his pulpit wearing his clerical robes to deliver his sacred sermon, he is unknowingly playing out the role of the ancient Greek orator.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the contemporary sermon does not have a shred of biblical merit to support its existence, it continues to be uncritically admired in the eyes of most present-day Christians. It has become so entrenched in the Christian mind that most Bible-believing pastors and laymen fail to see that they are affirming and perpetuating an unscriptural practice out of sheer tradition. The sermon has become permanently embedded in a complex organizational structure that is far removed from New Testament church life.

In view of all that we have discovered about the contemporary sermon, consider these questions:

How can a man preach a sermon on being faithful to the Word of God while he is preaching a sermon? And how can a Christian passively sit in a pew and affirm the priesthood of all believers when he is passively sitting in a pew? To put a finer point on it, how can you claim to uphold the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura (“by the Scripture only”) and still support the pulpit sermon?

As one author so eloquently put it, “The sermon is, in practice, beyond criticism. It has become an end in itself, sacred—the product of a distorted reverence for ‘the tradition of the leaders’ ...it seems strangely inconsistent that those who are most disposed to claim that the Bible is the Word of God, the ‘supreme guide in all matters of faith and practice’ are amongst the first to reject biblical methods in favor of the ‘broken cisterns’ of their fathers (Jeremiah 2:13).”

In light of what you have read in this chapter, is there really any room in the church’s corral for sacred cows like the sermon?