

Protagonist Corner

Do We Really Want a Truthful Pulpit?

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I still vividly remember a conversation I had with a woman during the first year of my ministry. She wanted to offer me some helpful hints. "Don't let us off too easy," she insisted. "We need to have our toes stepped on every once in a while and young preachers are usually pretty timid about doing that." However, it wasn't long before it was clear that she wanted to be the one to select the toes. It was all right to step on the toes labeled "church attendance," "stewardship," or "Bible study," but the ones that had to do with social justice or racial equality or nationalism were off limits. In the mind of my well-intentioned parishioner, it was one thing to chastise church members for failing to live up to broadly accepted ideals. But it was another thing entirely to call into question cherished values and convictions in order to re-examine these in light of a biblical faith.

The pulpit has many legitimate purposes. At various times it is a source of comfort for the sorrowful, reassurance for the doubtful, encouragement for the faltering, and enlightenment for the seeking. But the pulpit also has an iconoclastic function. The preacher who is faithful to his or her high calling will inevitably have to engage in the uncomfortable task of challenging the idols and myths of the age in order to expose them as untruthful. This is not an option but a divine mandate. Those who mount the pulpit are bound by scripture to "preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths" (II Tim. 4:2-4).

It is difficult to speak messages that are likely to leave people uncomfortable or upset. Many a minister has been tempted to be silent on sensitive issues rather than to risk being alienated from some of the people he or she loves. It was with this sort of dilemma in mind that Pascal wrote, "To tell the truth is useful to those to whom it is spoken, but disadvantageous to those who tell it, because it makes them disliked" (*Pensees*, 100). Unfortunately, sometimes the desire to be liked has outweighed the mandate to be truthful. We preachers tell ourselves, "Surely it isn't necessary to speak *this* message at *this* time. There is bound to be another truth which the people are more ready to receive." And in the name of love and pastoral concern we tiptoe around the very message that is agonizingly relevant to the hour at hand and instead dispense some "truth in general."

Over a hundred and fifty years ago, an Anglican woman came to the United States in order to study the religious situation in America and compare

it with the established church in England. Harriet Martineau's observations still sound bitingly contemporary: "It appears to me that the one thing in which the clergy of every kind are fatally deficient is faith: that faith which would lead them, first, to appropriate all truth, fearlessly and unconditionally; and then to give it as freely as they have received it. . . . What would Paul's ministry have been if he had preached on everything but idolatry at Ephesus, and licentiousness at Corinth? . . . what kind of apostle would he have been? Very like the American Christian clergy." (quoted in Robert N. Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion*, p. 70).

It is remarkably easy to avoid preaching disquieting truths. All that is necessary is to take a marketplace approach to ministry. Marketplace ministry in the pulpit means that the preacher supplies only that which is in demand by parishioners. That which is not in demand is not supplied. This does not by any means eliminate all truths from the pulpit, just those that are troublesome. However, it is just those truths that tend to be the most needed, whether or not they are wanted. Some years ago in Kansas City, former CBS correspondent Daniel Schorr was asked if he thought the news released to the U.S. public should be related to what the public wants to hear. He responded by pointing out that the most important information is sometimes the information that is not wanted rather than that which is wanted. To provide the people only what they want, he said, would not be to offer the news but just to provide a happy hour (in William K. McElvaney's, *Good News Is Bad News Is Good News*, p. 42). And so it is with a sermon. If sermons are primarily determined by what makes people feel good, then they can no longer be a means of setting forth the Word of God.

Vital truths are often tough both on those who speak them and those who hear them. But if the church is to be a community that embodies the truth of God in a world of illusion, members of the church must not only permit messages on sensitive topics but insist on them. Certainly the word that comes from the pulpit is not always right and should not be taken as the last word. But unless the people in the pews demand that the pulpit be free to challenge the assumptions of the present age and to re-examine in light of scripture the views and values which we all too often uncritically accept from the world, then the very quest for truthfulness in the church will be destroyed.