

Styles of Preaching

Dub McClish

It doesn't just **seem** like the preaching that comes from most pulpits across the land is different from what it was several years ago — it **is** different. This is the conclusion reached by Richard Wentz, professor of religious studies at Arizona State University in a study conducted in the early 1980s. Not only the content, but the length of sermons is affected by these changes, the study shows. In the Colonial period (18th century) the emphasis was upon the sovereignty of God. In the 19th century, the emphasis moved more to the requirement for man to act in response to God. Before the 20th century (and even well into it), it was not unusual for a sermon to last two hours. People did not mind it — in fact, they expected it.

How does Wentz describe current preaching? He points out that most “mainline” Protestant churches are fed sermons that are liberal and socially oriented. He continues:

And today's sermons average 10 to 20 minutes in length... Many are in the form of stories with 'cutesy characters' meeting apparent needs to be entertaining today. The sermons now seem to give people what they want instead of giving them what they ought to be saying. Most people go and listen to something which they hope will inspire them a little bit — titillate their feelings and emotions.

Consider the following observations from the comments of Mr. Wentz:

1. The serious decline in the moral fiber and religious convictions of our nation are at least partly explained by this change. When emphasis on the sovereignty of God and man's necessary response to His Word take a back seat to cute and entertaining stories, the moral and religious fabric of a people will surely suffer.
2. The acute ignorance in our nation of the most basic facts of the Bible may be at least partly explained by the drastic reduction of the length of sermons, assuming that any Bible was being preached in the 10-20-minute modern “sermons.”
3. Some of us who preach the Gospel (and some other stalwart saints) have been sounding this very warning of what was happening for some time, but not many have listened.
4. These things have not only affected the Protestant world; this sad state has fastened itself on the Lord's church.

Who can possibly imagine our Lord as such a preacher as described above? Peter and John were certainly not arrested in Jerusalem because they were so entertaining. Paul warned of those who demand such preaching (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Our aim must be to serve Christ rather than to entertain men (Gal. 1:10).

[**Note:** I wrote this article for, and it was published in *The Edifier*, weekly bulletin of Pearl Street Church of Christ, Denton, TX, February 16, 1984, of which I was editor.

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