

I

JOHNNY CAN'T PREACH

PART OF ME WISHES to avoid proving the sordid truth: that preaching today is ordinarily poor. But I have come to recognize that many, many individuals today have never been under a steady diet of competent preaching. As a consequence, they are satisfied with what they hear because they have nothing better with which to compare it. Therefore, for many individuals, the kettle in which they live has always been at the boiling point, and they've simply adjusted to it. As starving children in Manila sift through the landfill for food, Christians in many churches today have never experienced genuinely soul-nourishing preaching, and so they just pick away at what is available to them, trying to find a morsel of spiritual sustenance or helpful counsel here or there. So let me provide just some of the lines of evidence that have persuaded me that preaching today is in substantial disarray.

Anecdotal Evidence

I candidly admit that one line of evidence is subjective and anecdotal. For twenty-five years or more, I routinely have found myself asking my wife, “What was that sermon about?”—to which she has responded: “I’m not really sure.” And when we have both been able to discern *what* the sermon was about, I have then asked: “Do you think it was responsibly based on the text read?” and the answer has ordinarily been negative (matching my own opinion that the point of the message was entirely unsatisfactory). I would guess that of the sermons I’ve heard in the last twenty-five years, 15 percent had a discernible point; I could say, “The sermon was about X.” Of those 15 percent, however, less than 10 percent demonstrably based the point on the text read. That is, no competent effort was made to persuade the hearer that God’s Word required a particular thing; it was simply asserted.¹

Such sermons are religiously useless. If the hearer’s duty in listening to a sermon is to be willing to submit one’s will to God’s will, then one can only do this if the preacher does *his* duty of demonstrating that what he is saying *is* God’s will. When the Westminster Confession refers to the “conscientious hearing” of the Word, this is what it means—to hear it as an act of conscience, which is bound to obey God.

I. Nor am I alone here. At a faculty meeting at Gordon-Conwell once, someone reported that a study had disclosed that one-half of ordained ministers leave the profession before retiring. Most of the faculty gasped at this, but my good colleague Doug Stuart remarked: “I wish the number were higher; only about one in five can preach.”

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But the conscience is *not* bound to obey the minister; the minister is only to be obeyed insofar as he *demonstrates* to the hearer what *God's* will is. Therefore, there is no religious use (in the Protestant and Reformed sense; I am not qualified to speak about homilies in the Roman Catholic tradition) in a sermon that merely discloses the *minister's* opinion, but does not disclose the opinion of God. And there surely can be no use in a sermon that does not even disclose the minister's opinion clearly.

I've really desired something fairly simple for my family: to be able to talk intelligently about the sermon on Sunday afternoon or throughout the week. And to do this, all I really desire is the ability to answer three questions: What was the point or thrust of the sermon? Was this point adequately established in the text that was read? Were the applications legitimate applications of the point, from which we can have further fruitful conversation about other possible applications? Frequently, indeed more commonly than not, I have heard sermons about which my family cannot even answer the first question. And even when we can, it is very rare to find the point adequately established from the passage. Further, the applications suggested almost never have anything to do with the text. I find myself forced to concur with the judgment of Benjamin Franklin, who once heard a Presbyterian minister's sermon and afterward remarked:

At length he took for his Text that Verse of the 4th Chapter of Philippians, *Finally, Brethren, Whatsoever Things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, or of good report, if there be any virtue, or any praise,*

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think on these Things; and I imagin'd in a Sermon on such a Text, we could not miss of having some Morality: But he confin'd himself to five Points only as meant by the Apostle, viz. 1. Keeping holy the Sabbath Day. 2. Being diligent in Reading the Holy Scriptures. 3. Attending duly the Public Worship. 4. Partaking of the Sacrament. 5. Paying a due Respect to God's Ministers.—These might be all good Things, but as they were not the kind of good Things that I expected from that Text, I despaired of ever meeting them from any other, was disgusted, and attended his Preaching no more.²

Like Franklin, I find myself somewhat “disgusted” with sermons for the same reason he was. Unlike the deistic Franklin, however, I don't consider myself free simply to not attend church on Sunday, so his solution doesn't work for me and my family. Nor is my experience or Franklin's unusual. I find that others have noted the same kinds of defects in preaching.

2. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 147–48. Franklin's comments should not be dismissed due to religious prejudice, despite his objections to many Christian doctrines, and to the Calvinist/Presbyterian doctrines particularly (*ibid.*, 146). Franklin appreciated George Whitefield's oratory, writing approvingly of his (Calvinist/Presbyterian) preaching, which moved Franklin to unexpected pecuniary support: “I happened soon after to attend one of his Sermons, in the Course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a Collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my Pocket a Handful of Copper Money, three or four silver Dollars, and five Pistoles in Gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the Coppers. Another Stroke of his Oratory made me ashamed of that, and determin'd me to give the Silver; and he finish'd so admirably, that I empty'd my Pocket wholly into the Collector's Dish, Gold and all” (*ibid.*, 177). Cf. also the summary of the surprisingly cooperative relationship between Franklin and Whitefield in Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 110–13.