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BIBLICAL PREACHING IN AN ANTI-AUTHORITY AGE

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*P*reaching that costs nothing accomplishes nothing.

—JOHN HENRY JOWETT

. . . *U*ntil we have wrestled with God till the break of day, like Jacob, until we have struggled to the utmost limits of our strength, and have known the despair of defeat . . . [until] we have really understood the actual plight of our contemporaries, when we have heard their cry of anguish, [until] we have shared their suffering, both physical and spiritual, and their despair and desolation . . . then we shall be able to proclaim the word of God—but not till then!

—JACQUES ELLUL

*I*t is a poor sermon that gives no offence; that neither makes the hearer displeased with himself nor with the preacher.

—GEORGE WHITEFIELD

*W*e believe that the Scripture is the guide, and the infallible guide, of the Christian; but we know that if a Christian has some private prejudice or personal prepossession, he may so deflect the compass of Holy Scripture as to make it lead him entirely out of the way.”¹ These are the words of A.J. Gordon, written in 1886. His concern that men and women would be led “entirely out of the way” by a deficient obedience to the authority of the Bible is the same concern that we face today. Never has there been a time that was particularly friendly to biblical preaching.

During the apostolic days the reception to the preached word clearly demonstrates resistance from a hostile culture. Paul’s own apostolic authority was constantly challenged. Throughout the centuries biblical preaching has been rejected. Maybe in the day in which we live we see particular dangers; for it does seem that when people reject authority of any type that these are wilderness days crying for a voice—but not necessarily biblical preaching.

CULTURE’S DISINTEGRATION AND THE COLLAPSE OF AUTHORITY

We have all been made familiar with the state of our culture. Among those who have written on the disintegration of culture and the collapse of authority, Robert Bork observes that “The defining characteristics of modern liberalism are radical egalitarianism (the equality of outcomes

rather than of opportunities) and radical individualism (the drastic reduction of limits to personal gratification).²

David Wells perceives that Western society has historically been held together by three elements: tradition, authority, and power. Of these three, tradition was the first to go, although its demise was in many ways associated with that of authority. The family, schools, and other institutions which had preserved tradition have become so influenced by pluralism that they have little ability to influence succeeding generations. The result is that children are left to embrace the radical egalitarianism and individualism promoted by the wider culture.³

Almost thirty years ago Carl F.H. Henry presented a convocation address at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary titled "The Barbarians Are Coming." He insightfully observed, "We live in the twilight of a great civilization, amid the deepening decline of modern culture." He continued:

We sit glued to television sets, unmindful that ancient pagan rulers staged Colosseum circuses to switch the minds of the restless ones from the realities of a spiritually-vagrant empire to the illusion that all is basically well. . . . We are so steeped in the antichrist philosophy—namely, that success consists in embracing not the values of the Sermon on the Mount but an infinity of material things, of sex and status — that we little sense how much of what passes for practical Christianity is really an apostate compromise with the spirit of the age. . . . Our culture is lost to the truth of God, to the reality of divine revelation, to the content of God's will, to the power of his redemption, and to the authority of his Word. For this loss it is paying dearly in a swift relapse to paganism. The savages are stirring again; you can hear them rumbling and rustling in the tempo of our times.⁴

Henry was right when he noted that colleges and uni-

versities were faltering as the intellectual centers of society, instead becoming launchpads for social anarchy. What he feared has in many cases already taken place.⁵ The net result of intellectually bankrupt institutions of higher education is that they manage to graduate students who have no intellectual connection with the past, they do not understand its literature or thinkers, and are unable to think for themselves.⁶ Yet, the prevailing culture has taught them to rely upon themselves as the source of judgment. The self has become the authority. Thomas C. Oden calls this "autonomous individualism," which focuses on the detached individual as a self-sufficient, sovereign self. He says, "this individualism is in crisis today."⁷

This is not a pretty picture. Culture has disintegrated and is falling apart and authority has crumbled. We appear to be adrift. Western culture is fading slowly into the sunset. And there appears to be no one on a white stallion in the wings to rescue it. But the picture gets worse.

CHRISTIAN LIBERALISM AND THE DEMISE OF AUTHORITY

Not only is culture collapsing around us, but the church has fallen victim to its demise. Institutional Christianity has been caught in the throes of compromise with pluralism and spiritual adultery. Hence, the shift from absolutes to any number of equal truths raises little question in the mind of modern men and women. There is perceived to be no real authority.

What has happened is that the authority for ethical decision-making has become my story, my journey, my experiences, and my feelings.⁸ In my denomination, the American Baptist Churches in the USA, the operant authority has shifted, like the culture, from absolutes found in the Scripture to the supremacy of the self. This is reflected in the traditional doctrine of soul liberty. It does not mean—

as some have alleged today—that one is free to do whatever one wishes to do in order to express religious devotion. However, soul liberty for Baptists and for all Christians, when understood properly, is the individual's practice of his or her Christian faith, free from governmental intrusion, all the while anchored in the Scriptures.⁹ This hits at the very heart of what we preach. If there is no biblical authority everything is up for grabs. The struggle for the heart of every mainline denomination is in the balance as they face a future without a theological center.

The support of unbiblical practices of homosexuality as a viable and biblical (so-called) lifestyle, the acceptance of Sofia and the goddess as a way to heaven, the rejection of the atonement because it is considered to be a form of divine child abuse—all of these mark the transformation of what was once clearly wrong with what is questionably right. Henry lamented:

Obscure the vitalities of revealed religion, detour churchgoers from piety and saintliness, and in the so-called enlightened nations not only will the multitudes soon relapse to a retrograde morality, but churchgoers will live in Corinthian immorality, churchmen will encourage situational ethics, and the line between the Christian and the worldling will scarce be found. Even in the church barbarians are breeding. . . .¹⁰

Even the church has drunk culture's deadly potion. She has become liberalism's ugly twin. The institutional church has compromised with pluralism and spiritual adultery. Christian liberalism and the demise of authority now appear to be synonymous. One might think, "That's the liberal church. One can expect their demise. They deserve it. They had it coming." But we evangelicals cannot gloat in an immunity from the penetrating influence of culture and the disintegration of authority.

THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH AND THE COLLAPSE OF BIBLICAL PREACHING

Evangelicals might harbor a measure of smugness over our obedience to biblical authority. We preach the Bible, don't we? We call men and women to prayer and obedience to the preached Bible, right? Dallas Willard observes, "The 'open secret' of many 'Bible believing' churches is that a vanishingly small percentage of those talking about prayer and Bible reading are actually doing what they are talking about."¹¹

Not only this, but the church itself has accommodated to the culture in subtle and not so subtle ways. Sermons have become antidotes to bruised egos, lists of how-tos, and topical discussions on any number of themes—but not biblically centered expositions of what the Bible said to the culture to which it was written and what it says to men and women today.

Recently I spoke with someone who attends an evangelical church. In the course of our conversation the complaint was raised, "I just wish the pastor preached the Bible." I discovered that the pastor does use the Bible in his sermons—the church has not gone that far off the map. Yet, his sermons move away from the text and launch into topical lists of how to be a better Christian, or how to raise a decent family, or how to develop good relationships. Certainly one would not argue against any of these topics as virtuous for the Christian. However, when a pastor or teacher does this they face the problem that the Bible is used as a prop to say whatever they want to say—this undercuts its authority. What is said might be orthodox, but not expository.

This practice is not uncommon in preaching. Consider the books on preaching written throughout the centuries. Many do not have any sermons that one would consider expository. Yet when these preachers spoke there was an

authority about them, grounded in a theological mind. There was a recognized authority of the preacher. However, today even that is not a consideration.

So, where does this leave us? What are we to do? We understand that any shred of authority has disintegrated in our culture, except for the self. We see that the institutional church has mirrored the anti-authority mindset of its culture. And we are saddened to recognize that even the evangelical church has been seduced by culture's temptress. It leaves us with what we have always had—the same plea that Paul wrote to Timothy is the only hope: "Preach the Word."

Because we are beset by a breakdown of authority in society and even in some corners of the church, we need to preach the Bible. It is from this Bible that we understand who God is. Louis Berkhof wrote, "All our knowledge of God is derived from his self-revelation in nature and in the Scripture."¹² The Bible does speak to our age. The Bible has authority because it is a God-breathed book. You read it. You study it, and it will do something for you.

We are called to preach the Bible in an anti-authority age. Preach it. Reveal its contents. And get out of its way. Just like the lion. If you want it to do its job, get out of its way.

As for preaching, I am not talking about a sterile exegesis, or historical lecture. No, teach people to think critically. Show them what the passage has to say—it will change their lives. The way in which you preach may change, especially in light of the culture's collapse of authority. Yet, the message you preach must be grounded in the authority of the Word. Plant the sermon in the Bible and connect it to men and women—and get out of its way.

A.J. Gordon reflected on this when he wrote:

Preaching and teaching to be effective must take hold on man, as man does on God. Some sermons are fastened only at one end—take hold of God but not of men, or they take

hold of men without having any real grasp on God and his word. It is a good analysis which somebody has made for the text "Preach the Word." Preach. Reach. Each.¹³

The Word did its work in Timothy's life. His mother Eunice and grandmother Lois instructed him in the Old Testament Scriptures. Their lives were changed by this transforming Word. Timothy's life was changed. And Paul's life was changed—and many of those to whom he and the other apostles preached. The Bible changes people's lives. In 2 Timothy 4 there are four things that servants of the Word are called to do, and this book will help you in your ministry to do it: preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct; rebuke and encourage. This word is able to equip you to do everything in ministry—Timothy saw it in his mother and grandmother, and Paul saw it in his ministry.

When Paul wrote to Timothy the culture at the time was possibly more despicable than our own. It was demon-filled, and pagan to the core. Even the church faced opposition from false teachers. Men and women tried to resist, but the power of God came through. That is why Paul was not afraid to tell Timothy: "Preach the Word." He had a deep confidence in the power of the preached Word. If our day is bad, his day was worse. The Word changes lives.

You and I can have confidence in this Word—this Word that is a penetrating light, a mighty sword, a convicting whisper. Think of the times when you have heard this penetrating Word. You heard of your sinfulness. You heard of forgiveness. Your life was changed. In small and large ways this Word has soothed our sorrow, encouraged discouraged faith, convinced you of wrong in the way you live—even though at times we don't understand what has happened—we are different because of the Word. Yes, you and I can have confidence in this Word. We have seen what this Bible

has done in our own lives—this powerful, self-authenticating Word helps you to see that this is indeed a God-breathed book.¹⁴

This book does speak to our age. The Bible has authority because it is a God-breathed book. It is God's Word to us. That is all we have or we will ever need—despite what culture says or a corrupted church might argue against.

Biblical preaching in an anti-authority age is not a surprise antidote for our times or any time. We live in the tradition of men like A.J. Gordon who preached in an age as difficult as ours. He wrote:

We live in an age of scientific interpretation, when it is popular to take Scripture in a figurative sense if we can best suit ourselves by so doing. Any man who sticks to the literal sense may be sure of being set upon as a fanatic. Take a few plain texts such as "The Lord himself shall descend from the heaven with a shout;" "The prayer of faith shall save the sick;" "Give to every man that asketh of thee, and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again." Stand now for the plain, obvious meaning of these words, preach and profess and practice them and see if you won't be set down as an eccentric and very peculiar person. Well, now, when one has staked his all on a promise of God, determined to believe it at the risk of reputation, and to act upon it, no matter what the consequences, what prayer can be so appropriate as this, "I have stuck unto thy testimonies; O Lord, put me not to shame."¹⁵

Why is biblical preaching needed today? Because biblical preaching has authority and relevance for men and women to live in an anti-authority age. The Bible is self-authenticating. By the power of the Word through the Holy Spirit these God-breathed words change the lives of men and women. If we preach it, we will not be put to shame.

Men and women are called to preach the powerful,

authoritative Word in the midst of a culture that is looking for a voice in its wilderness. Biblical preaching is needed today because the Bible has authority and relevance for men and women to live in an anti-authority age. "Preach the Word!"

Author

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Notes

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3. David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 145-49.
4. Carl F.H. Henry, "The Barbarians Are Coming," *ABE Journal* 2:2 (June 1994), 3-4.
5. *Slouching*, 255-66.
6. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 1993), 3.
7. Thomas C. Oden, "On Not Whoring After the Spirit of the Age," in *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, eds. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago, Illinois: Moody, 1992), 193.
8. See Richard Lischer, "The Limits of Story," *Interpretation* 38:1 (January 1984), 26-38.
9. Scott M. Gibson, "Understanding the Limits of Soul Liberty," *ABE Journal* 4:2&3 (June-September 1996), 21.
10. *The Barbarians*, 4.

11. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco, California: Harper & Row, 1988), 186.
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13. A.J. Gordon, "Editorial," *The Watchword* 8:10 (December 1886), 217.
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15. A.J. Gordon, "The Psalmist's Three-Fold Confession," *The Watchword* 13:1 (January 1891), 4.