

Six Things That Must Be Included in Every Sermon

[Updated from an article originally published as "Six Things to Include in Your Preaching in 2011"]

By Bob Young

Almost a decade ago, an end-of-year Barna research report (December 13, 2010) suggested that the overall environment within US churches is changing. Most would say that the rate of change is accelerating with each passing year. Cultural, societal, and religious changes suggest a number of topics that the church needs to address. One way the church should address these topics is through preaching and teaching.

Barna's analysis of the new reality included six major factors: (1) increasing theological illiteracy, (2) an increasing inward focus, both for individuals and for churches, (3) increasing pragmatism coupled with decreasing interest in biblical principles, (4) increasing interest in community service, (5) increasing tolerance of alternative views and actions, and (6) a diminished or less apparent influence on culture and individual lifestyles. These six factors suggest six threads to be woven throughout sermons and Bible classes.

How do our sermons and classes stack up against these suggestions?

Sermons must be built on solid theological foundations. Sermons must wrestle with appropriate, applicable theological principles of Scripture. Without this foundation, sermons are less than biblical. Some sermons may be considered biblical in that they do not say anything false, but they are unbiblical in that they do not reflect, let alone communicate, the nature of God's truth. Sermons must communicate the message of Scripture and not merely use a biblical text as a springboard for whatever happens to come to mind. Unless Christians are challenged to think theologically, most will remain theologically uninformed. The sermon is a first line of defense against theological illiteracy. The Barna survey reinforces this point with the reminder that according to the research, only a minority of adults surveyed associate Easter with the resurrection of Jesus. Without solid theological grounding, the division within Christendom is only likely to increase.

Sermons must help the church develop a healthy balance between edifying fellowship and evangelistic fervor. The modern church acts more and more for its own self-interest and less and less for others. Most Christians do not invite non-Christians to church, do not discuss Christianity with their friends, and are not fully engaged in a local congregation. As the church becomes more spiritually isolated from its surroundings, sermons must again lift our eyes to the harvest, providing both motivation and insights for action. The pulpit must demand that the church address the needs of our world—first eternal needs, secondarily physical needs. Most churches will lose their missionary fervor without regular encouragement from the pulpit.

Sermons must provide a healthy and helpful combination of principles and action. It is not enough to provide knowledge. Sermons must make clear the application of biblical truths. Rather than moralizing about certain good behaviors, sermons must encourage the deeper thinking and meditation often associated with spiritual practices such as contemplation, solitude, silence, and simplicity. A healthy combination of truth and application will help Christians avoid the increasing tendency toward compartmentalizing life.

Sermons must present God's purpose for the church, guiding the church toward a balance between evangelism and service. With interest in community service escalating, churches are more likely to be

involved in benevolent activities both at home and in foreign missions. While ministering in the name of Jesus to those in need is a good thing, the challenge facing the church is that such benevolence often does little or nothing to advance the kingdom. Further, it is easy to become involved in such activities based on self-interest and feeling good more than self-sacrifice. The pulpit must address this delicate balance, urging people toward sharing the Good News with justice and compassion based on a biblical perspective rather than merely meeting physical needs and finding social acceptability.

Sermons must reflect a firm commitment to biblical principles, communicating the message of Scripture and God's truth with love. The Barna report suggests that

“the postmodern insistence on tolerance is winning over the church. Biblical illiteracy discourages making discerning choices for fear of being labeled judgmental. The result is a church that has become tolerant of a vast array of morally and spiritually dubious behaviors and philosophies. This increased leniency is made possible by the very limited accountability that occurs within the body of Christ. There are fewer and fewer issues that Christians believe churches should be dogmatic about. The idea of love has been redefined to mean the absence of conflict and confrontation, as if there are no moral absolutes that are worth fighting for.”

The pulpit must address the issue of biblical illiteracy, seeking a thorough approach to Scripture so that the church hears the “full counsel of God” and not isolated scriptural “tidbits.” The pulpit must also address the issue of moral absolutes, the nature of truth, and the question of Christian faith, worldview, and attitudes. Barna concludes,

“The challenge today is for Christian leaders to achieve the delicate balance between representing truth and acting in love. The challenge for every Christian in the U.S. is to know his/her faith well enough to understand which fights are worth fighting, and which stands are non-negotiable.”

The pulpit must be a positive influence that motivates to Christian living, setting forth a positive image of what is good as well as providing correctives and negatives when needed. Barna observes that “the influence of Christianity on culture and individual lives is largely invisible.” Many modern pulpits that are prone to moralizing and criticism in the name of correction would do well to consider that “honey works better than vinegar.” The church is in desperate need of a more positive and accessible image. A good first step would be Christian believers who implement their faith in public and private, encouraged by the preaching and teaching they hear each week.

So here is my resolution:

- my sermons will have solid theological and biblical foundations that communicate clearly the word of God contained in the message of the text,
- my sermons will help the church lift up its eyes to the harvest around the world while finding support for the work of God within a strong Christian community,
- my sermons will integrate both biblical truth and practical applications,
- my sermons will address how the church lives out and advances the salvation, compassion, and justice of Christ,
- my sermons will make clear the nature of truth, moral and truth absolutes, and Christian worldview with the goal of helping the church understand its counter-cultural role in a secular culture,
- my sermons will call God's people to living out the realities of their faith and seeking to make a difference in their little corner of the world.