

A Friendly Response to J. R. deWitt's

"A Few Thoughts on Preaching"

Dr. Terry L. Johnson

What strange ecclesiastical times we are living in today. We have not only encountered "Worship Wars," but "Worship Revolutions," "Worship Chaos," even "Worship Anarchy." Preaching, a central element of worship, has not been left untouched. The solidly biblical and theological content of the evangelical preaching of the mid-twentieth century has given way to "platform preaching." The biblical text has been reduced in many places to a launch pad from which to preach topical sermons, addressing the felt needs of "seekers." The text itself typically is left unelaborated, or if touched upon, explained without reference to historical-redemptive-grammatical context. This slide from the biblical to the "relevant" and "practical" is not universal, yet it is a development substantial enough to cause concern. Placed in the larger context of decline in the biblical content of the evangelical worship services, this is all the more troubling. Less is read, less is found in our songs, less is to be heard in our prayers, and less is explained in our preaching. This "debiblicizing" trend (Kent Hughes' term) is a tragedy if faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Rom 10:17); if the people of God are sanctified by the truth of God's word (Jn 17:17), if we are born again by the living and abiding word (1 Pet 1:23); and if we grow by the pure milk of the word (1 Pet 2:1,2). Any movement away from biblical exposition must be lamented, but also resisted and rebutted by those who care about the progress of Christ's gospel kingdom.

How are we to improve our preaching? John R. deWitt offers many practical suggestions: preach with vigor, develop a good outline, make relevant application, use vivid illustrations, engage the congregation, pastor the congregation, write out sermons (but don't read them), and trust that God will use faithful preaching to do spiritual good. All this is timely and well taken.

Lectio continua

Dr. deWitt also offers six objections to what he terms "a relentless and unremitting adherence to consecutive exposition" and calls such "a very large mistake." While perhaps no one would want

to defend “relentless and unremitting adherence” to *lectio continua* preaching, “faithful and regular adherence” should be encouraged. Why? Because it will help to improve our preaching. We offer our own four commendations.

First, *lectio continua* is a method that *encourages attention to context*. The adage, a text without a context is a pretext, has been verified *ad nauseum* in our day (see *Purpose-Driven Life* for regrettable examples of popular exegesis). It is more difficult to twist Scripture out of its context when last week’s sermon was on the preceding paragraph. Every sermon in a *lectio continua* series is by definition preached in its context.

Second, *lectio continua* is a method that encourages *close attention to the text itself*. Upon what is the preacher preaching? The next several verses beyond last week’s text. He is not preaching on a given subject, and then allowing his imagination to take him where it will. His task is the present text of Scripture. He must explain and apply it and no other. He may fudge the assignment. No method is foolproof. Yet the expository method is conducive of a careful handling of the text being preached, its meaning and its application.

Third, *lectio continua* is a method that encourages the proclamation of *the whole counsel of God* (Acts 20:17). Is there any doubt that preachers will tend to preach favored topics and avoid difficult or controversial ones? Is there any doubt, given human nature, that preachers will tend to jump upon their hobby horses again and again and ride them for all their worth? Sequential expository preaching forces one, over time, to deal with everything that God has to say. Since “all Scripture,” not some, not most, but “all” is “breathed out by God and profitable” (ESV), a method that encourages exposing God’s people to “all” that was given for their profit is to be encouraged, rather than one in which the pastor picks and chooses according to his perceptions and preferences. Verse-by-verse preaching forces the Bible’s agenda upon the preacher in its biblical proportions: faith as well as works, grace as well as law, justification as well as sanctification, heaven as well as hell. Verse-by-verse preaching also absolves the preacher of the accusation that he picked his text in order to attack someone in the congregation. He did no such thing. He merely preached the next verse.

Fourth, *lectio continua* is a method *that encourages the proclamation of the whole Christ*. Jesus on the Emmaus Road “interpreted to (the disciples) in all the Scriptures the things concerning

Himself” (Lk 24:27, ESV). We only find the complete revelation of Christ in “all the Scriptures,” Old Testament and New Testament, law, history, wisdom, poetry, gospel, epistle, and apocalypse. The diet should be varied according to a congregation’s needs. Also, larger series may be broken-up by a topical series. Series within series may be highlighted (e.g. within Matthew’s gospel: Sermon on the Mount, Beatitudes, Lord’s Prayer, Parables, Olivet Discourse, etc.). The *lectio continua* need not be slavishly implemented. Yet, as William Still would say, we only become whole people when we feed on the whole Christ as He is found in the whole Bible. *Lectio continua* preaching encourages exposure to the whole Christ.

Preaching today

One wonders what might have been if the celebrity pastors of recent years had committed their ministries to sequential expository preaching. How different might the results have been if the exceptionally gifted pastors of Saddleback and Willow Creek (to name two) had presented to the broader church a model of ministry built upon vigorous, careful, practical biblical exposition. Given the tens of thousands of church leaders that they have taught to “do church,” the condition of evangelical Christianity might be considerably healthier today.

On the other hand, many of the most fruitful ministries of our day have been devoted to *lectio continua* preaching. One thinks of the Americans John MacArthur (Grace Community Church, California), Kent Hughes (College Church, Wheaton), the late James Boice (Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia), Calvary Chapel’s Chuck Smith, First Baptist of Atlanta’s Charles Stanley, and Stonebriar Community Church’s Chuck Swindoll. Across the pond we may point to the Anglicans John Stott and Dick Lucas, Presbyterians Eric Alexander, the late William Still (and many of the men of the Crief Fellowship), Ian Hamilton at Cambridge Presbyterian Church, and Sinclair Ferguson, now at First Presbyterian, Columbia, as well as Geoffrey Thomas at Alfred Place Baptist Church.

Another matter

We agree that longer sermons are not necessarily better sermons. Yet we are surprised to see sermons of 20-30 minutes being recommended. Twenty minutes is too short, too much like the

sermonettes that John Stott warned would produce Christianettes. We agree that 45 minutes is too long for most ministers. One must be gifted, very gifted, to preach that long on a consistent basis. Thirty minutes, Dr. deWitt’s outward limit, is about right for most ministers. Thirty minutes is enough time to deal faithfully with the text, yet not too long to test the patience of the congregation.

Methods don’t make for great preaching. Every method can be poorly executed. Yet some methods are more conducive to the sanctification of the saints and salvation of sinners. *Lectio continua*, or sequential verse-by-verse preaching is such a method. Its widespread implementation would do much to improve our preaching.

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