

# Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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## CRITICAL MASS Part 20: The Limits of Preaching

by Gary North

*And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building (1 Cor. 3:1-9).*

God gives the increase. The increase I have been discussing in *Critical Mass* is the growth of the institutional church. Church members should ask themselves: "Is my local church growing? Are there other local churches in my community that are growing? If not, why not? If not, what can I do about it?"

Most businesses eventually fail. Of those that survive, most remain small. Yet small businesses are the source of most of the employment and innovation in a free society. This is why those who start a business must pay great attention to details before they start it. Market surveys, advertising, financing, and a detailed preliminary budget are the keys to success. "If you fail to plan, then plan to fail."

Much the same can be said of churches. They are small. They stay small. Over 90% of American congregations have fewer than 200 members. The mega-church of 2,000 members or more is a statistical rarity. This means that the mega-church is not a valid model for the local church. It is legitimate, but it is not typical. He who begins his ministry with the goal of becoming the pastor of a mega-church is analogous to the man who sets out early in life to marry a local beauty pageant winner. Such a quest is valid but unwise. The odds are that the man will either alter his expectations or else remain single.

Similarly, a local congregation may have delusions of grandeur. Members want to hire a preacher with remark-

able speaking abilities. They see preaching as central to formal worship as well as to church growth, so they conclude that the more skilled the orator, the more successful the ministry. They, too, want to marry the beauty queen.

The problem is, pastors are not married to their congregations. They can be recruited at any time by other congregations: larger congregations, better located congregations, better paying congregations. So, it may be possible to recruit a great orator, but word - his word - will get out. He has begun a career in which success is conventionally measured by the size of the church he oversees, not the size of the church he built. This success indicator is not the only one in denominations that have bishops, but not many denominations have bishops. So, he can establish his credentials as a winner by moving to a mega-church. He does not have to build one. He merely has to become visible to one.

### Hearers of the Word

Apollos was an eloquent man. "And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus" (Acts 18:24). No other person in the New Testament is identified as similarly gifted.

This should warn us: the gift of eloquence is as rare as the gift of speech is common. Not many people speak well in front of a group. The larger the group, the fewer the number of volunteers, and most of the volunteers are mediocre.

First, the ability to speak is rarely accompanied by the ability to motivate. It is more generally the ability to inform, or even less meaningfully, to entertain. "A fine sermon, pastor" may mean only "You kept me awake for the full 20 minutes" or "I chuckled at least three times." Entertaining sermons are a disadvantage to a church. James warned: "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (James 1:22).

Second, the ability to speak well is rarely accompanied by the ability to organize people. The handful of speakers who can motivate others to begin a project rarely have the ability to enable them to finish it. There is more to success than preaching. Other skills are mandatory. The preacher is only one cog in the wheel.

The eloquent man has a unique gift. The far more important question with respect to preaching is this: Is this

unique gift accompanied by the gift of leadership? Does the one who delivers the word have the ability to make doers of the word out of hearers of the word?

### **What Constitutes Effective Preaching?**

The question has a preliminary answer, unfortunately negative: "Whatever it is, they don't teach it at seminary."

Seminaries are staffed by humanist-certified academics who have never built or overseen a church. They are the equivalent of business schools that are staffed by bureaucratically certified academics who have never built or overseen a business. (An exception: the University of Dallas.)

Preaching must be covenantal. It must explicitly rest its case on the sovereignty of God. It must speak authoritatively in the name of God. It must lay down the law – God's law. It must tell listeners what to expect if they obey or disobey. Finally, it must raise up the next generation for good service. Preaching that neglects any of these five features is not systematically biblical. It will not achieve long-term success.

Each sermon need not reflect all five, but preaching over a long period of time can and should. This is why systematic preaching from the Old and New Testaments is mandatory. Chuck Smith, pastor of the mega-church Calvary Chapel in Orange County, California, is not noted for his oratorical skills. He is noted, if at all, only for his consistency: he preaches through the entire Bible every five years. In high-liturgy churches, pastors use a lectionary to structure their preaching strategy: specific passages from both testaments are used as guides.

Preaching must rest on the understanding that 90% of whatever is said in a sermon will be forgotten by the listeners within 24 hours. Within a week, even less will be retained. This is why preaching must be linear; it must reinforce what has been said before.

Preaching should be motivational. Preaching should be geared to changing bad habits and reinforcing good ones. ("You can't beat something with nothing.") It takes 30 consecutive days of a new pattern of behavior to break an old pattern. Old habits are rarely broken except by a systematic plan of action. A sermon that does not seek to change the listeners' thoughts and behavior – word and deed – is as useless as an advertisement that fails to ask someone to take a specific action. Most ads fail to do this. So do most sermons. At least Baptist "altar calls" try to elicit a specific action. Churches that use them tend to grow faster than churches that don't. Something is better than nothing.

### **Supplies Are Always Limited**

Michael Gerber lays down a principle of business success in his book, *The E-Myth*. He says that a successful business must be able to break down its operations into small steps that average employees can master. The business structure must enable ordinary people to produce extraordinary results.

Any business that relies on a supply of extraordinary people cannot become a large business. Extraordinary people are few and far between. They can command high wages. The best of them will not settle for high wages; they will insist on a share of ownership. The pattern of the great success stories of California's Silicon Valley – high-tech computer-related industries – has been repeated over and over: a spin-off company established by disgruntled employees of another high-tech firm makes the next big breakthrough.

It is the same in churches. Evangelical Christians are ordinary people. They are rarely the best and the brightest. Modern fundamentalism is committed to mediocrity as a way of life.

Jesus loves us, this we know;  
Even though our output's low.  
Short-term vision isn't wrong;  
Rapture fever makes us strong!

Neo-evangelicalism is formally committed to excellence, but only excellence as defined by, and certified by, the ruling humanist elite. So, conservative churches rarely attract and keep extraordinary people.

Americans are geographically mobile. They keep moving away. Others move in. How can the newcomers be taught to perform as well as those who just departed? Merely through preaching? But pastors are mobile, too. And in terms of higher education's total output of professionals, pastors are rarely the best and the brightest.

Modern evangelicalism places far too much emphasis and hope in the power of preaching. To rely on a steady supply of extraordinary preachers is as institutionally suicidal as to rely on a steady supply of extraordinary church members.

The secret of the church's success in history has been that it, more than any other organization, has begun with the presupposition that its members and leaders will be the fools of this world (1 Cor. 1:24, 27). Its success rests on its ability to produce extraordinary results from ordinary people – or worse. Any other institutional approach is doomed to failure. Even the Jesuit order, that remarkable assembly of academic overachievers, has gone the way of all flesh since 1965.

### **Conclusion**

The church needs a growing supply of regenerate people with mediocre talents. It needs ministers who have apprenticed under successful ministers. It needs simple, repeatable, low-capital strategies of church planting. It needs what the Wycliffe Bible translators alone seem to possess: a system for cultural penetration based on preaching – expositing the Bible in words that the listeners can understand and obey. We need preaching geared to bringing light to savages who live in great darkness. These savages are the products of the public school system and commercial television.

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