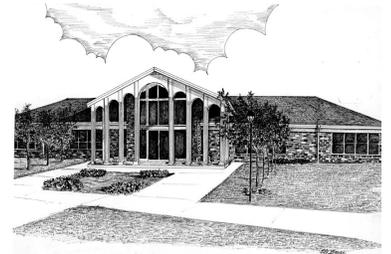


Faith Baptist Theological Seminary

Faith Pulpit



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Resources For Preaching

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Those who have listened to preaching for at least a generation are likely to observe that it is not what it was. On the basis of both anecdote and memory, it is on balance neither as interesting nor as compelling as it was within living memory. Furthermore, the results are not the same. First-time adult decisions for salvation used to be relatively common in many churches every Sunday. Now such decisions have to be programmed, usually after inducing people to make decisions in their own homes and then persuading them to come to church to go forward.

There are several ways to account for the difference. First, it may be the faulty memory of the middle-aged, as they think wistfully of good old days. Or it may be that homiletics courses are not as helpful as they used to be. Or that young preachers do not hear the able and earnest models that once were common.

While any of those may have some validity, I suspect that a major reason for the change lies somewhere else. It is that in the First Baptist Church of Laodicea the pastor has different intellectual resources that he draws on, and some of those resources are less than helpful.

I. The Decline of Reading.

The chain bookstores offer quiet and coffee to their customers, and they attract customers. The publishers are pouring out such a torrent of books that most go out of print in six to nine months, even before the library patron knows that a given title exists and before he can order it. But those matters do not assure that many preachers are reading books. Spurgeon was reputed to read three or four heavy books a week, but then he was a lightning reader. By

1950 Howard Sugden owned a library of about 5,000 volumes, and he estimated that he had read half of it, including the commentaries. His conference ministry is still legendary. A seminary friend of mine used to ask in his letters, "What are you reading these days?"

Churches seemed to catch the idea that their pastor's reading habits had something to do with their own spiritual welfare. Who ever heard of any objections that the ordination offering go to the new preacher's library?

However, when it comes to the use of books and study tools, my impression is that they are being used less and less. A pastor told me that he did not have time to read books, probably not one a year; and others give evidence of the same pattern. If any book gets used, it may be the concordance, from which the preacher may get verses to string together in a sword-drill sermon.

Some pastors may object that they have the marvelous resources of their computer program, with five translations of the Bible, complete commentaries, and perhaps even the texts in their original languages. They point with pride to the information that they can get off the Internet. Their objection sounds impressive, but I believe it could be shown that few of those programs produce Bible expositors, and few expositors make much use of those fabulous tools. I fear that the screen has proved to be a poor substitute for the printed page. It is a good medium for conveying information and data, but not for generating wisdom. It seems more than coincidence that the screen has become common just at the time when earnest exposition has become scarce.

II. The Orientation toward Entertainment.

We now have a whole culture geared toward near-constant entertainment. To about World War I, about the only common diversions were vaudeville and the preacher, with maybe summer concerts by the town band. During the second quarter of this century the movies became available, but hardly for the saints. The average movie-goer attended about once in three weeks, with the most avid of them going three or four times a week, or whenever the program changed. At mid-century the tube invaded the living room, attracting a viewing audience for about thirty to thirty-five hours a week. A broken TV set caused a near-panic in the family, because the medium proved highly addictive.

As the video reached the total population (practically nobody had it in 1947; almost everyone had it by 1952), it made its impact on preaching. More and more the TV seemed to provide the major intellectual resource that preachers drew on. Sports and the news took up the time that otherwise would have gone into books and periodicals. A notable preacher told me that he liked to go home after church and watch a movie; it helped him relax. Twenty years before that he would not go near a theater; now his private life was nobody's business. Meanwhile, his mental resources were withering, and the number of preachers going through that same change was legion.

The move to near-constant entertainment coincided with other trends. Preaching dealt less with the message of the cross and more with the concern for a good self-image. The programs, games and ads provided few spiritual and sermonic insights. As the wells dried up, I was astonished to

hear my former students preaching as sermon illustrations the scenes they had seen in movies. They seemed to have no shame in suggesting that their people accept what we had abominated not so very long before.

Those trends coincided with the decline in pulpit evangelism, and little wonder. Those trends also coincided with a love for the world that would have driven other generations to their knees. Can anyone affirm that the saints are less materialistic than they were a generation ago? Can anyone deny a cause-and-effect pattern here?

So now the wave of the future is to gear the whole program of the church to entertainment. The world provides the means to draw people to Christ, and the big churches got big by offering experience and amusement. Worship leaders have replaced worship.

III. The Love for the Artificial

In 1886 and 1887 Spurgeon was going through a hand-to-throat struggle with German theology, later to be known as Modernism. *The Sword and the Trowel* carried articles for months about the Downgrade Controversy, so named after the first article, "The Downgrade." Those same issues contained articles deploring the occasional practice of preachers attending the theaters of London. We may now say that Spurgeon hadn't seen any-

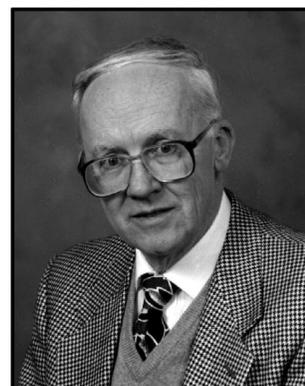
thing yet. We have all but lost any conscience about the tube, the video, the stage or the movies. A missionary remarked to me at his table that he had really enjoyed a certain movie. He did not like the profanity, and the homosexuality bothered him; but it was a good show. Another missionary wrote me about some pastor who recently walked in on his whole staff watching porn on the church computer. The saints have come a long way, and it is a rare conscience that agrees with Spurgeon's.

It would seem that one effect of the high-tech entertainment so easily at hand is that it has dulled our sense of reality. We seem incapable of dealing with declining numbers except by using the world's methods. Another effect has been to replace the preacher's reading with his viewing. That may seem painless, but it also seems a violation of the principle that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). Another effect has been to lighten the spiritual content of preaching, dulling the insights and reducing much of it to moralizing. Why eat vegetables when you can get potato chips? Why offer sirloin if the crowd will be satisfied with hot dogs?

It is probably true that the invention of printing with movable type was a direct cause of the Reformation—which then led to four centuries of intermittent heoism, martyrdoms, evangelism, missions, and

sainthood. All that has now been reversed. I have a strong suspicion that our high-tech replacement for the printed page has more than a little to do with the declining number of expositors, the declining number of missionary candidates, the rise of Entertainment Church, and the near-universal love for the world among professed Christians. We have paid a high price for our toys.

Brethren, it seems time to get back to our books, and most of all the Book.



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