

Scholars in the Pulpit

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When I became a Christian in my adulthood, it was my good fortune to have as my preacher a man whose role as a minister of Christ made me want to be a preacher. His name was Roy Miller and the most impressive thing about him to me was his knowledge of Scripture and his ability to challenge his listeners to desire a greater understanding of the word of God. In fact, I would often go to his office during the week with a list of questions and spent an hour or more listening to him explain things to me because I couldn't get enough from his weekly sermons.

It was from him that I became fascinated with the Greek language and the insights he could give his audience concerning the meaning of Scripture from the Greek New Testament. I thought of him as a scholar in the pulpit and that made a tremendous impression on me. It was his influence and his example as a gospel preacher that made me want to become a preacher.

After four years of undergraduate work and a number of years more acquiring two graduate degrees, I found myself fulfilling my goal in emulation of my mentor preacher. But, I was being told over and over that I didn't belong in the pulpit, that I should be in a college classroom because scholars had no place in the pulpit. In fact, it was suggested that scholars are wasted in the pulpit.

This seemed to me a curious attitude toward the role of the preacher and his responsibilities to the community of believers. Why should the depth or level of instruction in my preaching to a congregation of the Lord's church not be the same as the instruction given in a classroom to the student believer studying to be a minister? Moreover, what is the graduate in ministry supposed to do with the instruction given him in his classroom studies when he goes

into the pulpit? Is he supposed to “boil it down” or simplify everything he has been taught so that it will be intelligible to the community of believers? Is the church not capable of understanding the word of God unless it is reduced in level of content or simplified for a more simple-minded audience?

What does this say about the intellectual level or mental acumen of the typical community of believers? Is this not exactly what the Roman Church has done for centuries in their distinction of clergy and laity? Here the clergy is assumed to be of greater intellect in matters of faith than the laity, for whom such matters must be “simplified” for the more “simple mind.” Such a concept is a complete betrayal of the restoration concept. This was one of the greatest issues in the thinking of Alexander Campbell, who spent his life exemplifying what he believed the church deserved from the man who stood in the pulpit of the Lord’s church. Read his sermons and consider the level of his preaching.

If we are attempting to restore the Christianity of the New Testament, we are going to have to recognize the fact that the early church did not distinguish the church membership from its ministers in terms of their ability to understand the message of the apostles of Christ. In fact, the earliest writings of the early church were the letters of Paul and these were addressed to the community of believers as a whole, not to a special group who were considered intellectually superior to the church proper. Were these people of 2,000 years ago that much more intelligent than the people of the twenty-first century?

From the time of the fourth century when the Roman emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan and created a bureaucratic hierarchy to govern the church, the “laity” has been considered a peasant class not capable of understanding the deeper things of God. The knowledge of God contained in Scripture became the possession of the clergy, which was to be simplified and shared with the peasantry as they saw fit. It is well known that for centuries the Scriptures were not considered intelligible to the Christian community at large.

This view was challenged by those scholars who led the Reformation Movement of sixteenth century Europe and so also those who led the Restoration Movement of nineteenth century America. However, the attitude concerning the ability of the average church member to understand the whole message of God as revealed in Scripture does not appear to have changed much from that of the Roman Church of earlier centuries. The message of Christianity has too often been reduced to little more than emotional froth and entertainment than that of an intellectual challenge sent to us from God. So much so that the average Christian considers Christianity to have two distinct sets of teaching: (1) those teachings of a scholarly nature for the ministry and (2) those of a more simplistic nature for the church community.

How has the church, the community of Christ, allowed itself to become convinced that it only needs the simplified version of the message of the New Testament? What reasoning lies behind the thinking that a preacher should never assume or expect too much intellectually when addressing the average congregation? How often have preachers been told by a given congregation that their preaching consists of too much instruction and not enough entertainment, that they would rather be made to feel good than be made to think? Where did we ever come by the idea that preaching was to be entertaining and that humor was essential to the making of a good sermon? Who convinced us that the average church member is incapable of grasping an intellectually challenging presentation from God's word?

Do we really want to shut our minds down when we come to church? Is the worship only for the purpose of bringing our emotions to life while we place our minds in dormancy? Are we not capable of being emotionally fulfilled by enlightenment? Do we feel nothing at having our faith informed by a deeper understanding of God's revelation of his will for our lives? Why do we want our preacher to be well informed concerning the things of God but not ourselves? Too many sermons reinforce people's lack of knowledge more than inform their faith with the unsearchable riches of God's word.

It is hard to believe that this cry for simplification comes from our inability to grasp the more challenging teachings of Scripture. Perhaps, it is more a lack of desire to apply ourselves to an understanding of the wonders God's word. If you have been led to believe that you are incapable of grasping anything but "a simple sermon" designed for the simple minded, you need to think more highly of yourself than that; and I am not going to encourage that kind of thinking by lowering my standards of preaching.

As a gospel preacher I see myself entrusted with the most powerful message ever given to man; it is my responsibility to set this message in all of its power and integrity before the people who constitute the community of believers. The people I've preached to over the years have proven to me that they are capable of great understanding and delight in the presentation of an intellectually challenging sermon. These are those who truly ennoble themselves by their desire to be knowledgeable and enlightened.

There is surely an inconsistency involved in the claim that the average person cannot understand the deep things of God yet this same person has no trouble applying himself to some of the most complex and advanced areas of knowledge of our time, whether finance, engineering, computer science, business, law, or medicine, and this should be especially so with those who are educators.

I would rather be a preacher than anything else in the world, but that role must be redefined in our time for both the preacher and the church. The church is the New Testament's first institution, not the college, the university, or theological seminary. It is the pulpit that deserves the church's best thinkers. To be a scholar does not mean that one is to be removed from the community of believers and sent away to the classroom and libraries of our institutions of higher learning. This would never have happened to Jesus, Paul, the other apostles of Christ, or anyone calling himself a minister of Christ in the first century, and it should not be happening now.

The word "scholar" is from the Latin word *scholaris* meaning "a schooled person." He is simply one schooled or learned in a given

area of knowledge and his schooling doesn't have to come from the formal classroom; in fact, with the right books and an adequate amount of determination anyone can be a scholar. The best thinkers of the Restoration Movement were essentially scholars who had schooled themselves and they exercised their greatest influence from the pulpit and through publications read by the community of believers. If one does not want to pay the price to be accomplished as a preacher, perhaps, he should find something else to do. If the church wants to restore the integrity of the preaching of the first century church, then, perhaps, it should demand the best and the most challenging efforts in edification from every pulpit throughout the brotherhood.

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