

Falling on Deaf Ears? — Why So Many Churches Hear So Little of the Bible

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“It is well and good for the preacher to base his sermon on the Bible, but he better get to something relevant pretty quickly, or we start mentally to check out.” That stunningly clear sentence reflects one of the most amazing, tragic, and lamentable characteristics of contemporary Christianity: an impatience with the Word of God.

The sentence above comes from Mark Galli, senior managing editor of *Christianity Today* in an essay entitled, “[Yawning at the Word](#).” In just a few hundred words, he captures the tragedy of a church increasingly impatient with and resistant to the reading and preaching of the Bible. We may wince when we read him relate his recent experiences, but we also recognize the ring of truth.

Galli was told to cut down on the biblical references in his sermon. “You’ll lose people,” the staff member warned. In a Bible study session on creation, the teacher was requested to come back the next Sunday prepared to take questions at the expense of reading the relevant scriptural texts on the doctrine. Cutting down on the number of Bible verses “would save time and, it was strongly implied, would better hold people’s interest.”

As Galli reflected, “Anyone who’s been in the preaching and teaching business knows these are not isolated examples but represent the larger reality.”

Indeed, in many churches there is very little reading of the Bible in worship, and sermons are marked by attention to the congregation’s concerns, not by an adequate attention to the biblical text. The exposition of the Bible has given way to the concerns, real or perceived, of the listeners. The authority of the Bible is swallowed up in the imposed authority of congregational concerns.

As Mark Galli notes:

It has been said to the point of boredom that we live in a narcissistic age, where we are wont to fixate on our needs, our wants, our wishes, and our hopes—at the expense of others and certainly at the expense of God. We do not like it when a teacher uses up the whole class time presenting her material, even if it is material from the Word of God. We want to be able to ask our questions about our concerns, otherwise we feel talked down to, or we feel the class is not relevant to our lives.

And Galli continues:

It is well and good for the preacher to base his sermon on the Bible, but he better get to something relevant pretty quickly, or we start mentally to check out. Don’t spend a lot of time in the Bible, we tell our preachers, but be sure to get to personal illustrations, examples from daily life, and most importantly, an application that we can use.

The fixation on our own sense of need and interest looms as the most significant factor in this marginalization and silencing of the Word. Individually, each human being in the room is an amalgam of wants, needs, intuitions, interests, and distractions. Corporately, the congregation is a mass of expectations, desperate hopes, consuming fears, and impatient urges. All

of this adds up, unless countered by the authentic reading and preaching of the Word of God, to a form of group therapy, entertainment, and wasted time—if not worse.

Galli has this situation clearly in his sights when he asserts that many congregations expect the preacher to *start* from some text in the Bible, but then quickly move on “to things that really interest us.” Like . . . *ourselves?*

One of the earliest examples of what we would call the preaching of the Bible may well be found in [Nehemiah 8:1-8](#) (ESV):

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

Ezra and his companions stood on a platform before the congregation. They read the scriptural text clearly, and then explained the meaning of the Scripture to the people. The congregation received the Word humbly, while standing. The pattern is profoundly easy to understand: the Bible was read and explained and received.

As Hughes Oliphant Old comments, “This account of the reading of the Law indicates that already at the time of the writing of this text there was a considerable amount of ceremonial framing of the public reading of Scripture. This ceremonial framing is a witness to the authority of the Bible.” The reading and exposition took place in a context of worship as the people listened to the Word of God. The point of the sermon was simple: “to make clear the reading of the Scriptures.”

In many churches, there is almost no public reading of the Word of God. Worship is filled with music, but congregations seem disinterested in listening to the reading of the Bible. We are called to sing in worship, but the congregation cannot live only on the portions of Scripture that are woven into songs and hymns. Christians need the ministry of the Word as the Bible is read before the congregation such that God’s people— young and old, rich and poor, married and unmarried, sick and well—hear it together. The sermon is to consist of the exposition of the Word of God, powerfully and faithfully read, explained, and applied. It is not enough that the sermon take a biblical text as its starting point.

How can so many of today’s churches demonstrate what can only be described as an impatience with the Word of God? The biblical formula is clear: the neglect of the Word can only lead to disaster, disobedience, and death. God rescues his church from error, preserves his church in truth, and propels his church in witness only by his Word— not by congregational self-study.

In the end, an impatience with the Word of God can be explained only by an impatience with God. We all, both individually and congregationally, neglect God’s Word to our own ruin.

As Jesus himself declared, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Mark Galli, “[Yawning at the Word](#),” *Christianity Today* [online edition], posted November 5, 2009.
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/novemberweb-only/144-41.0.html>

Hughes Oliphant Old, [The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Volume 1: The Biblical Period](#) (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2007).

