

When Your Preacher is *Not* John Piper

Steve Burchett

Many who have had the privilege of hearing John Piper¹ preach in person would testify that it felt like a monumental event. His preaching is a powerful combination of truth and passion, leading to convicted and exhilarated listeners. After the sermon, certain hearers might leave wondering if they were just in the presence of a figure who will be talked about in future centuries.

Then they go back to their home church, where several things are different, including the preaching! Thankfully, the gospel is still proclaimed. In fact, the sermons are thoroughly biblical, but the ability of their regular preacher simply does not measure up to the phenomenal preaching they recently heard.

Unless you regularly attend the church of one of the celebrated preachers of our day, you most likely have faced a similar situation. Either at a conference or on the internet, you have heard exceptional preaching, but each Sunday you're back in your simple little home church that hardly anybody beyond your town knows about, with its "nobody" of a pastor who will probably never preach to thousands.

What *if* your gospel-preaching pastor is not as good as one of the great orators of our day? Is it time to sell the house, pack up the family, and change churches? No, I don't think so. But what should you do?

First, rejoice that your preacher is a man who proclaims the gospel. In some towns, finding a man who preaches the true gospel is as difficult as locating that precious new golf ball you sliced 100 yards into the thick woods! I once endured a 40 minute sermon that consisted mainly of the preacher telling about his family's vacation. Though that might be an extreme example of non-gospel preaching, too many preachers fail to speak of the holy God, sinful humanity, and the redeeming work of Christ. But not your preacher. He speaks honestly about sin, boldly proclaims "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), and then lovingly invites listeners to repent and believe. That is a reason to rejoice.

Second, recognize that certain men are uniquely gifted by the Lord to have an international ministry and appeal, but this is not the norm. The typical local church should be satisfied to appoint as pastors men who are "above reproach" in their lives, who believe the gospel and are able to teach God's Word, and who have an aspiration to serve as shepherds (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Most preachers will

¹ John Piper is the main teaching pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and a regular preacher at conferences all around the world.

not be strikingly smooth and polished. They may never be the keynote speaker at a big conference, but this is not a tragic shortcoming in your corner of God's kingdom. It is precisely His design.

Third, if your pastor is (honestly) dull, but he preaches the truth faithfully, a little statement I once heard might be helpful for you to remember: "The mature worshipper is easily edified." When hearing lackluster (even if biblical) preaching, *immature* worshippers will typically not listen to the message because they wish the messenger was more exciting. Conversely, *mature* worshippers eagerly receive the truth as it is proclaimed, even if it sounds like the preacher is reading a phone book.

Fourth, listen "outwardly" to the preaching. Here's what I mean: Sit with your Bible open and routinely make eye contact with the one preaching. An occasional nod of your head when he makes a point will encourage him and stir up his confidence. In my experiences of both preaching and listening to sermons, I can confirm that yawning listeners with glazed over eyes make mediocre preaching worse, while eager listeners inspire better preaching.

Fifth, verbally encourage the preacher(s) in your church. Every preacher who is not extraordinarily gifted has heard remarkable preaching and moaned, "After listening to that, why do I even try?!" This is a strange phenomenon, but great preaching from the renowned teachers of our day makes many "ordinary" pastors *discouraged*. Here's a simple way you can buoy your pastor: After a sermon, instead of just saying "Nice sermon!" as you head out the door, take a few moments to tell him what was especially helpful and/or convicting from the sermon. In the first church I served as a pastor, a particular young couple would stay after the service, about once a month, conversing with me about what they learned. These helpful conversations sometimes lasted for over an hour. Even today, I am heartened when I recall their zeal for what was taught.

We should praise the Lord for giving us outstanding, well-known preachers, but let us not forget Paul's command to Timothy, who was entrenched in a local church with pastors whose names none of us know: "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).

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