

PREACHING IN AN AGE OF ENTERTAINMENT

Have you ever noticed how many television commercials say nothing about the products they advertise? The typical jeans commercial shows a painful drama about the woes of adolescence but never mentions jeans. A perfume ad is a collage of sensuous images with no reference to the

product. Beer commercials contain some of the funniest material on television but say very little about beer.

Amusing Ourselves To Teach is the name of a perceptive but disquieting book by Neil Postman, a professor at New York University. The book argues powerfully that television has crippled our ability to think and reduced our aptitude for real communication. Postman says television has not made us the best informed and most literate generation in history. Instead, it has flooded our minds with irrelevant and meaningless information.

By far the book's most trenchant message is in a chapter on modern religion. Postman, not a Christian in the strictest sense of the word, nevertheless writes with piercing insight about the decline of preaching. He contrasts the ministries of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Charles Finney with the preaching of today. Those men relied on the depth of content, profundity, logic, and knowledge of Scripture. Preaching today is superficial by comparison, with the emphasis on style and emotion. "Good" preaching by the modern definition must above all be brief and amusing. It is entertaining--not exhortation, reproof, rebuke, or instruction (cf. II Tim. 3:16; 4:2).

Most churches typically feature a half-hour sermon with lots of amusing anecdotes but little doctrine. In fact, many preachers think of doctrine as undesirable and impractical. A major religious magazine recently published an article by a well-known preacher. He mused for a whole page about the futility of both preaching and listening to sermons that go beyond mere entertainment. His conclusion? People do not remember what you say anyway, so most preaching is a waste of time. His last statement was cutting but true: "People, I have discovered, will forgive even poor theology as long as they get out by the hour."

There is an obvious parallel between that kind of preaching and those trendy jeans-perfume-beer commercials. Like the commercials, it aims to set a mood, to evoke an emotional response--to entertain--but not necessarily to communicate anything of substance. Such preaching is sheer accommodation to a society bred by television. It is not the kind of preaching that Scripture mandates. We are "to preach the word" (II Tim. 4:2), "speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine" (I Tim. 6:2,3).

If the dilemma of modern preaching is to be changed, Christians must insist on biblical preaching and be supportive of men who are committed to it. How does a preacher of integrity teach people who may

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be unwilling or even unable to listen to carefully-reasoned expositions of God's truth? That may be the greatest challenge for today's Christian leaders. We cannot yield to the pressure to be superficial. We must find ways to make the truth of God known to a generation that not only does not want to hear, but may not even know how to listen.

--Doug Parsons

PULPIT HELPS, August 1989