

Proper Use and Abuse of the Pulpit

The pulpit, according to Merriam Webster Dictionary, is “an elevated platform or high reading desk used in preaching or conducting a worship service.” The English Dictionary succinctly defines it as “a raised platform in a church, usually enclosed, where the minister or preacher stands to conduct the sermon.” The pulpit is used in several congregations whereby a preacher stands to address members while delivering a sermon or addressing the congregation in teaching the word of God, perhaps as a matter of expediency. However, it should be noted that whether a preacher uses a pulpit, a desk or nothing at all to preach from, it does not in any way affect or invalidate the message being preached. By “pulpit” we mean the sermons preached, but also the various other ways a preacher may influence people publically and privately” (Pharr, 2008). Essentially, “the pulpit” is ‘the position of authority a speaker occupies’ whenever and wherever he exhorts or instructs others with the word of the Lord. Thus, the purpose of this article is not to address the “pulpit” in the sense of its physical “design” or its “elevated” status; but rather to look at how those who used “the pulpit” have abused it and how to avert this abuse, and properly use it as God intends.

While Paul went into Macedonia, he left Timothy in the church at Ephesus that he should instruct certain brethren not to teach other/strange doctrines nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than *godly edification which is in faith* (I Timothy 1:3-4). He was further instructed to “preach the word... Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (I Timothy 4:2). From the forgoing passages, some things are evident: First, it reveals that messages from the pulpit should be geared toward *godly edification* of the recipients or hearers. Second, only the word of God should be preached from the pulpit as the church has no business in secular subjects. Third, messages that would be sounded out must be ones that are geared towards convincing those who believe otherwise, rebuking those who sin (I Timothy 5:20) and exhorting those who hear. In all of these, the spiritual edification of members is very paramount as the assembly of God’s people is often centred around edification (cf. I Corinthians 14:26, Hebrews 10:25).

To exhort, according to Barnes (1884) denotes urging to the practical duties of religion, in distinction from one who teaches its doctrines. It is an act of presenting the warnings and the promises of God to excite men to the discharge of their duty. This explains why teaching is separated and different from sermon or exhortation (cf. Romans 12:7-8). All these must be done with all longsuffering and teaching. Many brethren do not recognize this distinction, and then conflate them when they are called upon to deliver either of them on the pulpit. This is one of the reasons for its abuse.

Just like Titus, Timothy is also required to appoint elders in the church (I Timothy 3, Titus 1:5). Since elders are required to be teachers or as the Bible calls it, “able to teach” and “holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine,

both to exhort and convict those who contradict"(I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9), it therefore means that they must have been regular teachers and sermonizers in the church before their appointment and so, the work of preaching or giving sermon on the pulpit is not exclusive to only the preachers in the congregation but virtually all able male Christians (2 Timothy 2:2). On this issue, McGarvey (1870) observes that the source of information by which the elders were to silence these men, was not the philosophy in which the latter boasted, but the faithful word which had already been taught, as implied in Colossians 2:8. Furthermore, Romans 12:6-8 and I Corinthians 14:26 clearly shows that various members in the church have to minister in various capacities in the church and not exclusive to the preacher(s) in a congregation.

"Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, *let us prophesy* in proportion to our faith; or ministry, *let us use it* in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness." (Romans 12:6-8)

"How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification." (I Corinthians 12:26)

Because of this freedom, perhaps, many brethren who are privilege to preach on the pulpit have greatly abused it. Since a good number of individuals are privilege to use the pulpit in the church, it is being abused by most members and preachers. Some have utilized the pulpit as an avenue to fight the war of personal vendetta even when Jesus clearly gave the process of resolving conflict between members who have misunderstanding amongst themselves (Matthew 18:15-17). Some members come to show off their talents and display their eloquence on the pulpit while others even come unprepared to officiate in one item or the other. It is germane to note here that some preachers or sermonizers, rather than planning their lessons to save souls and strengthen people spiritually, turn the pulpit to a comedy stage and present lessons to entertain with humor and oratorical ability as if the church is a comedy house. Others are even more concerned with what the hearers think of them than the message they are to deliver, thereby trying to create friendship via worship. As opined earlier, some do not recognize the difference between a sermon and a teaching and they end up teaching a Bible principle when they are asked to deliver a sermon. Perhaps, these individuals who frequently abuse the pulpit have not been properly taught (and of course, one cannot give what he does not have). We should not also be oblivious of the fact that some are always learning but never coming to the knowledge of truth (II Timothy 3:7). In fact, when they ought to be teachers, they still need someone to teach them the elementary truths of God's word all over again (Hebrews 5:12). When members like this mount the pulpit at church services, they tend to abuse it and the edification of members during such church gathering is truncated.

Meanwhile, suffice to state that messages from the pulpit should be that which would be instructive and not abusive or insulting, and that means the teachers and sermonizers should know and be able to teach and draw applications from great lessons of the Bible to exhort the congregation. The word of God, as well as the present observable needs of a congregation should determine how and what one preaches. One should not prepare a sermon to attack another brother or group of brethren who had quarrel with him. A preacher should not make an unnecessary allusion to issues he had settled among members or families in the congregation during his sermon. While such may not be wrong, it does not look very expedient. We must impart the word of God, and should recognize that we have made no impact until someone has learned. When it becomes so obvious to the hearers that a speaker is attacking a particular person in the church in his presentation, people would lose interest and such a lesson may not be appreciated, at least by the person being attacked. Inspired Paul captures this well in Ephesians 4:29-31 –

“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.”

There is a huge difference in teaching and just verbalizing information. We should reexamine our attitudes, methods, and anything else that affects the teaching process, striving always for greater effectiveness in teaching and admonishing. Reproving and rebuking error is not synonymous with uncouth treatment or abusive language. We must learn to preach for the right purpose and not to gratify ourselves.

The church is a divine institution established by God to glorify Him (Ephesians 3:21) via true worship (John 4:24, Philippians 3:3) and by performing the functions of saving souls as well as grooming the saved souls to observe all the commandments of God (cf. Ephesians 4:11-12; Matthew 28:18-20). It was designed by the wisdom of God and was built by the Lord in fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose to declare His manifold wisdom (Ephesians 3:10-11). The church should not be turned to an avenue for venting personal vendetta since that is not the purpose of its existence. Since in the church of the Lord, there is no room for anyone to be idle as there is work for all to do, each Christian is to use his or her talents and ability to serve God effectively in his Kingdom. Following this line of thought, the fine songwriter, J. H. Sheppard unequivocally states, “In the vineyard of the Lord, there is work for all to do... Let your eyes see the need of workers today.” Part of the works to be done in the kingdom of God includes going out to preach the gospel, teaching and admonishing the members (II Timothy 4:2), conducting or officiating at the Lord’s Table, etc. and virtually all members are Bible teachers in the church of Christ. For one to be a practical instrument for use in the church of God, one must be ready to

serve effectively in every capacity he is featured. Let us not forget the words of the fine songwriter, Isaiah Baltzell, who once wrote:

I want to be a worker for the Lord,
I want to love and trust His holy word,
I want to sing and pray and be busy every day in the vineyard of
the Lord

Let us all strive to be good workers in the vineyard of the lord and let us properly use the pulpit. By so doing, the church will grow; thereby producing several men and women who know the truth (2 John 1) and are ready to stand by it (Jude 3) since the church is the pillar and ground of the truth (I Timothy 3:15). Not those who have their values all mixed up (Isaiah 5:20).

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