

Popular or Prophetic?

We ministry leaders need to think about this question: “When I preach or teach in the church, why do I do it?” This is a question of motivation. There are two primary ones.

To be *popular* is one motivation. We ministry leaders are like most other folks. We like to be liked. We want people to have a positive impression of us, to say nice and encouraging things about us, and to respond in a way that gives us satisfaction. But given the fact that the Bible often says things that are hard to hear, you can see how the need to be well-received can warp the ministry of the word.

The desire for popularity is not a new problem among ministry leaders. Scott Gibson quotes English churchman Charles Gore from over a century ago: “The disease of modern preaching is its search after popularity.” Gibson goes on to note that in our day:

“Star preachers appear on television, on the internet, at conferences, and in the publication world through books, tours, speaking circuits, magazine features, and polls. These preachers are raised to pedestals and platforms, adored and almost worshiped in a twenty-first-century marketed way. We live in a culture of self-importance.”¹

So what are the characteristics of preaching and teaching that are aimed at popularity? Consider these five markers.

1) *The desire for a response which boosts the speaker.* What preacher doesn’t like to hear “Good sermon, pastor!” several times as people head out the door after the worship service. But what does that phrase really mean? And if we don’t hear it or see lots of visible response during the service, do we feel unsuccessful? The desire for such positive affirmation can turn us away from addressing difficult Scripture texts or lead us into manipulative altar call techniques. Should we be so needy?

2) *An entertainment atmosphere.* As Mark Galli of Christianity Today notes,

“(T)he sermon in many evangelical churches represents a cross between the patter of a standup comic and the opening monologues of late-night television. The idea is to be ‘authentic’—that is, natural and unscripted and funny to boot.”²

How important to you is it that hearers laugh and give you visible and audible positive feedback? The higher the importance, the more likely we are to perform for the audience. If our goal is a response that affirms us, then we have become entertainers rather than servants of God and his word.

¹ Gibson, Scott. *The Disease of Modern Preaching That Will Kill Its Power*. The Logos Bible Software Blog, <https://blog.logos.com/2019/07/the-disease-of-modern-preaching-that-will-kill-its-power/>.

² Galli, Mark. *And Now, the Star of the Show...* ChristianityToday.com, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/july-web-only/elusive-presence-cult-personality-pastors.html>.

3) *An excess of personal illustration.* Occasional and carefully selected personal stories are useful. They can help the audience engage with you and thus open their ears to what you are saying. But done too often, they turn preaching and teaching into exhibitionism. It turns listeners' attention to you rather than to God.

4) *A focus on listeners improving themselves or feeling better.* We live in the therapy and self-help age. Everyone wants to be better at relationships, managing money, parenting, career advancement, romance, and self-esteem. You will be very popular if you tell people how to do these things and mix in some Bible verses that help them feel spiritual to boot. But it's hard to fit "you're a sinner and your soul is in eternal danger" into therapeutic preaching and teaching.

5) *Fueling the cult of personality.* The payoff here is when church members enthusiastically tell their friends, "I go to (your name here)'s church!" You've made it. You're the star of the show.

The alternative motivation to popularity is the desire to be *prophetic*. Prophetic in this sense doesn't mean predicting the future; it means faithfully delivering the word of God in a God-magnifying way. Here are four markers of prophetic preaching and teaching.

1) *It always declares, "Thus sayeth the Lord."* As Gibson says in the same article mentioned above, "Our task is to announce who God is to this generation." We do that by impressing *his* words upon the hearts and minds of the hearers. That is our preaching and teaching task. Success in this calling is faithfulness, not popularity. The authority is in God's word, not in our performance ability.

2) *It points hearers to Christ and the gospel.* We want those in our ministries to think about the Lord as much as possible and the speaker, quite frankly, as little as possible. Yes, the ministry of the word is a public leadership role and we, the messengers, do matter. All the more important, then, that we do nothing that hinders folks from encountering God in all his majesty. We need to get out of the way rather than drawing attention to ourselves.

3) *It calls for repentance.* The concept of sin is completely out of fashion today. We have challenges to overcome, shortcomings to improve, and issues to resolve. But sin? Guilt? Subject to God's judgment? Way too harsh. Just give me some good therapy so I can get better. A faithful prophet, on the other hand, doesn't mince words. Sin separates us from God and any hope of something better until we confess it and turn away from it, turning to the Lord in humble faith.

4) *It's delivered with an attitude of humility and reverential fear.* James 3:1 reminds us, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (ESV). Preaching and teaching the word of God is an awesome, *dangerous* calling!. Flippancy is out of place in the pulpit. We who have this high calling will give an account to the Lord.

Now don't go off on a tangent. Prophetic does not mean obnoxious, unlearned, unpracticed, humorless, or coldly impersonal. It simply means that our purpose is always to "announce who God is to this generation" and call people to him based on the full counsel of his word. We must dedicate ourselves to that task in the Spirit's power whether or not folks give us the rewards of popularity.