

Did God Show Up at Your Church?

(A message for preachers)

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Let's face it, all that really matters inside the church house is, "Did God Show Up?" On some occasions it doesn't happen and nobody is sure why. In spite of this, we keep praying that we may "Abide in His Presence."

The theme for the AEGA World Conference this year (2006) is "Abiding in His Presence." Yes, we are praying that His Presence will abide with us, but sometimes it doesn't occur, and we are left with a puzzle. One of most quoted Scripture concerning "His Presence" is found in Psalms 91:1: "He that dwells in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

I have found myself on many occasions asking ministers, "How many people showed up at your church?" I've realized this question should be changed to, "Did God show up at your church?" Somehow we as believers are programmed to believe a "big crowd" will move God to a point of performing some mighty acts so we shall feel "His Abiding Presence." Yet, I've learned this is simply not true. In addition, I've attended services where thousands were in attendance, and I left the service dead and lacking motivation. On the other hand, I've been in services where only fifteen people were present, but God showed up, and I left the service on a spiritual high and rejuvenated.

While we need the "Abiding Presence of the Almighty," we also need to be aware of how effective "Biblical Preaching" will cause Him to abide with us.

Effective Preaching. It's not always easy to know whether your sermon is "bombing out" or "hitting the target." Just because you're getting a lot of "Amen's" does not mean that you're hitting the target. Preachers want to know if their sermons are "having an impact and effecting change in the listener's life." Even when there is feedback from the congregation, it's not easy to know for sure if you've "hit the mark." As an example, you may preach a sermon on "How to save your marriage." One person may say, "thank you" for being sensitive to those with marital problems. Another may say, "The pulpit is not the place for discussing marriage. Save your comments for the counseling room." In the end, your sermon may affect more people than you think, although there is no immediate comment from the audience. In Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, preachers expect an "Amen" from time-to-time when the preaching is really getting "hot and steamy." The preacher may feel that his/her sermon is making an impact, but is it? Even when the preacher hears a lot of "Amen's" this is not a definite sign the sermon is effective. A pastor must ask, "Are my sermons meeting the needs of my congregation?" Rather than stalwartly maintaining the stance of, "I'll preach what God tells me to, come hell or high-water." While the latter position sounds "super-spiritual" it usually follows that those who hold this view are frequently legalistic and abusive in their preaching. Now, this doesn't mean you as a preacher should preach a "social sermon" just to make people feel good. But it does mean you should be sensitive to the needs of each person listening to your message.

What is good preaching? Good preaching will bring the Presence of God to a service. In some instances, it may appear as though you've not preached your greatest sermon, because you didn't get a single "Amen." Don't worry yourself about this. Old Testament prophets preached fiery sermons that were rejected by kings, priests and people. Consider that the one who sits quietly in the pew without making a sound may be the one that was convicted and motivated to action by your sermon. While it is true you may get some "Amen's" when you preach to felt needs, that doesn't mean that your sermon is always effective over the long haul. An "effective sermon" (or good sermon) is one that is remembered one week after a person heard it.

It focuses on "Christ." I believe that exposition has no place in the pulpit. It is only the giving of facts and figures and doesn't draw people to Christ. Exposition is a popular method used by theologians who can't preach. While on the other hand, "Expository Preaching" is what is needed. This kind of preaching brings conviction and change to people's lives. Today, we are hearing a lot of sermons in Spirit-filled churches and via television that are nothing more than "exhortations." Good preaching may contain some exhortation, but is more than just trying to make people feel good, or make them feel bad. Expository preaching is "Biblical Preaching" from its core. When the expository sermon is arranged and delivered properly, the effect is overwhelming.

It focuses on the "needs of people." It is never an easy task to spend hours praying and designing sermons that really touch the heart of listeners, but it happens. It has been said, "A good preacher spends 30 minutes preparing for every

minute he preaches. A great preacher spends one hour preparing for every minute that he preaches.” In other words, a “great preacher” will spend 30 hours preparing for a thirty-minute sermon he preaches; this is why he is called “great.” Regardless, it’s important that he doesn’t lose sight of “why” he needs to preach his sermon. Again, he must be sensitive to the needs of people in his church, and develop his sermons around their needs.

It focuses on “moving the listener to think.” Most people who listen to his/her pastor weekly seem to fall in a routine way of listening. In other words, it takes a lot to get them to think. A dynamic sermon appeals to a person’s logic. A pastor must continually search for ways and means to challenge people to think about how the “Word of God” should be applied in their everyday lives. A dynamic sermon appeals to the logic of a person, not only their emotions.

It focuses on “moving the listener to act with his heart.” When one is emotional, it means his/her heart has been touched or moved by something the pastor said. Although emotions may trick one into following the wrong path, a good sermon will always solicit an “emotional response.” One cannot be guided everyday by his/her emotions, but if there is nothing in the sermon that emotionally moves a person, then the sermon was a “flop.”

It focuses on “directing people.” People need direction. It’s not good enough to tell people “what the Bible says,” but “how to apply” what it says. Most pastors spend too much time talking about what words mean, or passages mean, but little time talking about “how to apply” what the Word of God means. The Bible is an Old book that deals with today’s problems. Trying to explain to a person how to make the mental transition from “listening” only, to “understanding and acting” is sometimes difficult.

It focuses on “changing a person’s will and ways.” People often get “stuck in a rut.” They need someone to explain how they can get out. A good sermon will appeal to the will.

It focuses on “simplicity.” Some preachers are too complex, wordy, and theological. The best preacher will take a difficult subject and make it simple enough for a seven year old to understand.

It focuses on “spiritual growth.” There is not a formula for “spiritual growth” but when a pastor preaches sermon after sermon for years upon end, and sees no spiritual growth in his people, this should cause a “red light” to appear. Moreover, it does seem that church-goers become “spiritual giants” because “spiritual gifts” are operating in the local church. From time-to-time, pastors teach that “spiritual gifts” are the solution to everyone’s problems. A teaching of this sort leads people down a path of confusion. The truth is, “spiritual gifts” do not solve people’s problems, but they are given freely to those who desire them.

It focuses on “different styles of preaching.” After a period of time, people grow tired of hearing messages arranged in a certain style. It is best for a pastor to change styles from time-to-time. Try preaching textual sermons, topical sermons, and expository sermons. There are many ways of preaching a good sermon, but the standard three or four point sermon still works best for most preachers, because it helps the listener to remember what was said. Don’t forget about the importance of illustrations.

Illustrations help to:

- a) Explain a point
- b) Prove a point
- c) Persuade people to trust the Word
- d) Create interest
- e) Challenge people to remember what was said
- f) Touch the hearts of people and cause them to act
- g) Move people to understand abstract truth.
- h) Break down the “defense mechanisms” of the listeners

When the church doors open again, pray that as a preacher you will lead people to an understanding of “abiding in His Presence.” Then, you will find that it becomes easier for the people to receive the Word of God and to act on His message.