



The Tri-Cities Edifier

Volume 11

March 30, 2025

No. 13

The Pulpit

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“Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hikiah, and Masseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishel, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand.” (Nehemiah 8:4)

Ezra stood at a wooden podium. Other translations use the word pulpit. Ezra stood at the pulpit. What follows is that he opened the book of God read from it and then explained it so that everyone understood. Today, we’d say, ‘Ezra preached.’

I have stood behind several pulpits recently. Most were wooden. One was metal. Some were old, one was new. Some were big and some were small. Some I liked and some I didn’t. When I was in India, one place had a pulpit made of marble. In my office, I have a very old pulpit, probably over 100 years old. Preachers aren’t the only ones that use podiums. The president does when he gives a speech. Many important events, even high school and college graduation ceremonies will have a podium for someone to stand behind.

Have you ever wondered why church buildings have pulpits? The main purpose is to have a place to sit the Bible and any notes that the preacher may use. Most places have the pulpit elevated above the floor, this is so everyone can see. Some pulpits look really nice and add to the décor of a building. Others are more functional than pretty. One place I was at had a flat monitor screen on the surface where one would put his Bible. It was a bit awkward for me getting comfortable with that. My Bible covered the screen, and I couldn’t read it, so I had to hold the Bible in my hands most of the time.

I have spent most of my life standing behind pulpits. Youngsters have asked me, “what do you see when you are up there?” I always tell them, “I see everything!” There are some lessons we can gather from the pulpit.

First, the man behind the pulpit is not better than the audience on the other side of the pulpit. In fact, the man behind the pulpit needs the message, needs Jesus and needs to heed the Bible, just as much as the folks on the other side. Long ago, behind the pulpit represented the clergy. They wore robes and seemed to walk as if they were one of the apostles. They were not. Both sides of the pulpit must make choices about attitudes, sin and how closely they will walk with the Lord. One side of the pulpit is not better than the other.

Second, I have learned that behind the pulpit does not indicate that you know more about the Bible than those on the other side. That impression is often left there. Behind the pulpit is not infallible. Behind the pulpit does not have every question figured out and everything running just as it should be in his life. Knowledge of God’s word isn’t based upon which side of the pulpit you are on. It’s based upon how much effort, energy and time one has put into studying God’s word. Many a preacher has made the mistake of thinking that he knew more Bible than anyone else in the building. Many learned the hard way, that wasn’t the case.

Third, Ezra is a great reminder of what is to be done with the pulpit — he read God’s word and explained it to the people. Sometimes we mistake our opinions for God’s word. We push our thoughts, our agendas, and our wishes rather than sticking with God’s word. There is no place for politics in the pulpit. We don’t want Washington preaching to us and Washington doesn’t want the church campaigning for it’s favorite candidates. Advice can come across rather “preachy” sometimes.

Fourth, the power of the pulpit lies within the word of God and not the charm or the abilities of the preacher. Some preachers are just natural public speakers. They are smooth, good and know how to connect with an audience. For others, it's a work. The sermon on paper sometimes is lost in the delivery. Other times, there is not much to the sermon, but the smooth talking preacher can sure make it seem like he's got a lot there. The temptation for the gifted speaker is to be careless and cut corners and not do his homework that is necessary in developing a sermon. He can 'talk his way through anything,' can actually be a curse rather than a blessing. Error can slip in through one who is not using the Bible very much. Preaching is more than just reading verses. It's explaining and making sense so the people will understand, as our Nehemiah context tells us. This necessitates that the preacher first understands the concepts and passages and makes sense of them in his mind and heart before he teaches others. He can't really teach what he doesn't know. Jesus described it as the blind leading the blind. Preachers can make us laugh. They can make us cry. They can make us feel good. They can tell amazing stories. But in the end, they are supposed to be preaching and teaching the word of God. They are not stand up comics. They are not leading a pep rally. They are not motivational speakers. They are preachers of God's word. Paul told Timothy to "preach the word." Now, each of us must use our personalities, abilities and know-how to do that the best that we can. The power of persuasion lies within the powerful word of God. It is the power to save. It can drive away fear and worry. It can answer questions and establish faith. We rally around the word of God, not the preacher. Preachers come and go. Some preachers are really good. Some are so-so. But it's not the ability of the preacher, but the word of God that matters. Paul wasn't a favorite in Corinth. Some didn't think too much of his preaching. But that's ok. What he spoke was the word of God, and it was that word that mattered.

There is an old saying in prayers that we don't hear much any more. Someone would pray that the preacher would "hide himself behind the cross!" The thought was that at the end of the sermon, the audience thought more of the cross than they did the preacher. In fact, in great sermons, the preacher is forgotten. He's just a tool, like a pencil, a keyboard, or a piece of paper. What the focus is upon is the words of God. Egos, self-esteem issues, pride, and things like that can occasionally cause that preacher to come out from behind that cross and stand in the way. When that happens, it's more about the preacher than the message.

Ezra stood behind a pulpit. Wish I had a picture of that old pulpit. I look at that old one in my office and wonder who all stood behind there and the wonderful good that came from those old sermons long ago. It's not the pulpit, nor the messenger, but the message that builds faith and develops strong families and churches.

The question is not which side of the pulpit are you on, but rather, which side of Christ are you on? Now, that's a question to ponder.