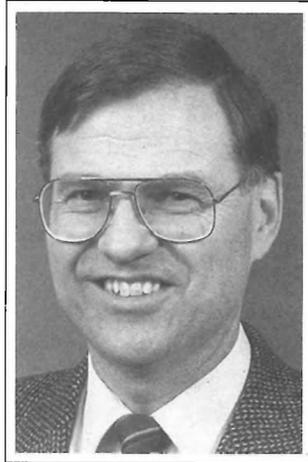


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Kydd, Ronald. "The Power of the Pulpit." *The Pentecostal Testimony* 73, no. 10 (October 1992): 22-23.



by  
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# The Power of the Pulpit

**The physical presence of the pulpit in our churches has great symbolic and mystical meaning.**

**T**he Watchnight Service held in Calvary Temple, Winnipeg on December 31, 1959 was a significant occasion for me. I had been a Christian for 11 months. In this service Calvary Temple was featuring my church, Weston Gospel Church, a church which it had planted. My pastor, Arlo Johnson, was going to preach, and I was going to give a testimony.

### **Awesome Experience**

Standing in front of that large congregation was an intimidating experience, but what lodged in my mind was the walk up the stairs on the right-hand side of the platform, across the green carpet and behind that amazing pulpit. Of course the person who usually occupied it was a pulpiteer of the first order. I had heard him preach. Now I was standing behind it.

The pulpit was of marvelously carved dark wood. The little pulpit light with the dangling chain was on. The central surface was sloped, but my hard-covered burgundy Bible was held securely

in place by the cushioned, green material which covered it. On either side of the central section was a lower wing which added to the imposing bulk of the structure. Pulpits have fascinated me ever since.

There was the rough, box-shaped one out at Gull Lake Mission. There was the large, dark one at Elim Tabernacle, Saskatoon, with its decorative strips of wood attached vertically. Pastor Mike Horban used to rest one elbow on it when he preached. There was 'my' pulpit; at least, it was for a little while. It was an astonishingly generous donation by our architect when we built our build-

ing in Kanata, near Ottawa. It was hand-carved out of oak on the island of Crete, then shipped to Canada.

### **Encompassing the Preacher**

The most extraordinary pulpits I have ever seen were in Scotland. These products of the Reformation rise at the centre of the front of the churches. Even in small rural churches you get 'into' the pulpits by climbing a flight of stairs. Often as you are seated in the pulpit before rising to begin the service, someone closes the gate through which you had just climbed. There was no escape. You were 'in' the pulpit. Once in a small country kirk, when I stood to call people to worship, I discovered that I was at the same eye level as a woman who was seated in the first row of the balcony about 8 meters away from me.

Peculiar structures, these pulpits. You can't see most of the preacher when she or he stands in or behind one to preach. Pulpits feel like

throwbacks to another age when people did not understand anything about communication.

When someone is preaching and you're sitting in the congregation, the pulpit sometimes has a funny effect. You have to sit with your head raised at an unnatural angle. In some of those Scottish churches it was a case of, "Look up. Look waaay up!" Why did people build pulpits the way they did?

For one thing, their height is significant. The elevation did not just allow the congregation to see the preacher better. It forced the congregation to raise their heads.

### The Upward Look

That is not a posture we like a lot. We live in a world which does not have much time for the idea of authority. We're a culture of equals. Nobody has to look up to anybody.

Sorry, but that posture is appropriate in church. Church is about meeting with almighty God and hearing His voice. It is about looking into the heavens and cocking an ear and an eye to pay attention to God.

But a person's neck can get sore. The posture is uncomfortable. Who said going to church was supposed to be comfortable? You worship, acknowledging God's worth - and discovering your own sinfulness. You listen to the preaching, being blessed by the richness of God's mercy - and being humbled by your own spiritual poverty. Having fun was not the main idea in God's mind when He cre-

ated worship. True enjoyment in worship can only be experienced through repentance and faith. That pulpit up there forces me to come to terms with the Holy One who knows me perfectly and loves me anyway.

### Not Entertainment

The sheer bulk of many pulpits is important. First, they can overshadow the preachers, hiding most of their bodies. We're not used to that. We have grown accustomed to seeing our performers. They're right there in front of us, either at our sight lines or below them, and nothing obstructs our

see every move they make.

If you are an entertainer, you want easy access to everybody in the audience. You want to be able to 'eyeball' them all and pull them into the performance. That's where the sparks fly and the juices flow!

And that is why, when it has had a choice, and of course it has not always had the choice, the Christian Church has done its preaching from pulpits. Church is not theatre. We don't go there to be entertained. If it weren't for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we wouldn't dare set foot in the place, because when we go there we're confronted by God. It doesn't matter if we're entertained. It matters that we are gripped by hearing the

Word of God proclaimed in preaching.

The irony is that the voice of God comes out through a weak, stumbling, unworthy human being who ought to be trembling that he or she has the nerve to stand and try to be a mouthpiece for God. And it should be thus. Preaching is not performance art.

### Empowering the Message

The success of preaching does not depend on the performance, the smoothness, the oratory, the slickness of the preacher. Of course one tries to learn the craft and preach well, but the success of preaching depends on the Holy Spirit. He takes the Living Word which is given through a dying person and makes it a vehicle of life.

Success doesn't depend on whether the people can see the grace of the preacher's movement or the cut and colour of the preacher's clothes. It depends on God finding a humble servant willing to be used. If the pulpit hides most of her or him most of the time, so be it. Dying people don't need to see a dying person; they need to see the living Christ.

But doesn't all this fly in the face of communication theory? I'm happy to report that every pastor I've had, from Arlo Johnson to Frank Patrick and Steve Kennedy has been a person of the pulpit. And all of them have seen

congregations grow under their preaching.

The size of many pulpits is important in another way, too. They sit there, heavy and impenetrable. As you try to see the preachers, your eye stumbles over them. Their bulk shocks us and interrupts us. What their mass says to me is "Pay attention! What's happening there is crucial to your well-being!"

### Willingness to Hear from God

What goes on in the pulpit is anything but trivial. That activity is not an amusing addendum to an entertainment glutted culture. That pulpit stops society in its tracks. That pulpit challenges the cocky self assurance of us 'chilled out' sophisticates. God speaks there. It's a place where the Eternal invades the temporal so that the shifting can be drawn into the Unchanging.

The pulpit is not just an archaic piece of furniture. It could be argued that it represents the human being's willness to hear from God. I notice that our pulpits seem to be getting smaller and smaller. Maybe there has been an unwritten rule governing pulpit design through the centuries: the greater the human awe toward God, the larger the pulpit; the greater the human illusion of grandeur, the smaller the pulpit. I wonder! ■

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