

## Emptiness of Religion

I sat in that pew years back. Two conferences a few years apart. One preacher. Well known.

Faithful, they said. Famous, maybe. At least semi-famous. Folks came with pens drawn like blades. Hungry. Lanyards. Wanting. I went because I wanted to know how to preach the Word. Clean. Expository - that's what they called it.

A kind of science to it. Steps and outlines and smart arches. His seminary's hermeneutics handed down like law from Sinai.

And he gave us all of it. Structures. Greek tenses. Syllogisms carved like ivory. The importance of clarity. Of fidelity. Of saying only what we observe in the ink.

And yet when it ended I walked out politely- but quiet and unsure. Felt like I'd sat through a seminar on how to write an engaging book report or public speech. A good one. Maybe even a great one.

But that was it? It felt soulless to me. No blood on the page. Mechanical.

Everyone clapped. Smiled. Took photos with the man. Had him sign books and bibles.

I thought- maybe it's me. Maybe I'm just missing it.

So I went home. Waited for my next turn to preach. And when it came I did it the way they showed me. Verse on verse. Cross references like proving a math formula.

Doctrine laid brick by brick. Transitions clean enough.

And brothers- it was dead. Got a few good comments after. But I felt like a fake. I told the truth up there. But it wasn't me telling it.

I could've let a machine write it and it might've come out better. A fine sermon.

Polished. But it would have been a fine letter written for a crossway email. No soul required.

And I knew then I wanted no part of it.

I don't want to teach or be taught as though God were a subject.

Like scripture was a frog you've dissected and organized the parts to parse. Only by naming the parts can you know what a frog is.

But there isn't any jump left in him. The flies are safe in the sterile ammonia smell.

As though the cross were a thesis and not a personal rescue of me and my children. I want to preach like a man both fully saved and wholly desperate. One foot in the Word and one foot hanging over the abyss from which Christ pulled me.

Not as a scholar. But an eye-witness and survivor. A man who's not just seen a map or read articles. But has been there. Can tell you what it's like by my own experience - not like a travel guide brochure you see in hotel lobbies.

You can parse the verbs and trace the covenant thread and still not truly know the One who wrote it. Not in a way that matters. Might even be saved- but you've treasured sitting at textbooks more than sitting with Him.

Like that scene in Good Will Hunting. That bit where the boy gets told he's never really been anywhere or experienced anything - but he could write volumes them. You read about the Sistine Chapel but you've never stood beneath it - can't tell me what it smells like or how the sun feels in the gardens.

You love to quote the Reformers and Puritans but you've never been moved like them.

You admire their theology but have never experienced it. You love to quote them - because they talk about experiences you've only pretended to comprehend. And you quote one another because posterity surely won't. Nothing new is said worth remembering.

I don't care if you can tell me how hot the burning bush burned because you've read a book about it. If you've never taken off your sandals and fallen flat on your face before the flame and felt the heat on your neck- then you've missed the whole thing. You talk about the resurrection like it's a doctrinal commentary. I need to know if it's happened in you.

The world's not starving for knowledge. We got more than we can stomach in a hundred lifetimes.

We need men with torn cloaks and blistered feet to bear witness of experiencing God. Men who've wrestled angels in the night. Who bear the limp. The holy testimony of the ones who've known God and died and lived again.

May we have men been who've been there.

Or don't give us anyone at all.