



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Papers | Reviews | Essays

## Making Up the Lost Time

David Anguish

It's been an ongoing joke with more than a bit of an edge ever since I can remember. Preachers want ample time to cover their material. The difficulty is in defining "ample." More and more, hearers have come to believe the old adage that, "If you haven't struck oil in 30 minutes, it's time to stop boring." Preachers can remind them that Paul preached until midnight (Acts 20), but will probably be challenged to prove he didn't begin at 11:40!

This is not a defense of long sermons. Times have changed and the reality is that, while people probably still can be schooled to stretch their listening time somewhat, our presentations must compete with a mind-set grown accustomed to sound bites, advertisers who think 30 second commercials are eternal, and camera angles which change every 3-6 seconds.

In commenting on the shifts of emphasis which have made the church more secular, changing religion from a passion to a pastime, the late Reuel Lemmons noted that, "Whereas the preacher once was God's anointed to proclaim the glad tidings of good things, he has become a professional staff manager and counselor. He often is an actor, concerned more with his role, his manners, and his polished delivery than with the possibility of his lips being touched with a live coal from the altar" ("Foreword," in *The Worldly Church: A Call for Biblical Renewal*, Revised Edition, xvi).

In view of such changes, it is not surprising that many no longer expect the preacher to perform the role of teacher, but to be primarily an encourager (or, in some cases, cheerleader). This change has contributed to the dearth of real Bible knowledge more and more preachers lament in their congregations. For, you see, there was an advantage to the longer sermons which we have not discussed much, namely, their usefulness for instruction in the faith. Stories were once told of law courts using New Testament Christians as "replacement Bibles" for taking oaths in court. Whether or not they were apocryphal, these stories illustrate the reputation the church once had for being a *people* (not just a minister) of the Word.

The challenge we now face is to make up the lost instruction time. No one would consider a doctor with as little knowledge of his craft as many Christians have of the Bible. Yet we profess that our knowledge of God is the most important thing in life. If we will be in step with our times in what we expect in our sermon lengths, let us also be in step with them in awareness

---

that we simply must know more in order to really compete in today's information society. We suggest three things.

First, all believers must be challenged to see the danger of a trend which stresses application to the exclusion of doctrine. A successful argument can be made that at least some preaching in our fellowship was once out of balance and did not offer much in the way of practical application. But surely we can see that we are also out of balance, and just as far from where we need to be, when we don't understand that there can be no application if we have no knowledge base from which to draw.

Second, we should appreciate the need to adopt the style of the Hebrew writer who challenged his readers to cease their satisfaction with the fundamental and mediocre and grow up (cf. Heb. 5:11-6:3). Some are long overdue to accept the challenge to study meaty matters and get off a milk diet.

Third, leaders must be willing to creatively explore ways to replace the instruction time lost in the move from two hour to half hour sermons. The trend all around us today is to emphasize continuing education. What is called for is not a return to the particular ways of the past, but the courage to find methods which fit the present even as they challenge us to reach for the deep things of God.

God's people, not just their leaders, are expected to be equipped for service (Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Peter 3:15). Surely, we can find ways to make up the lost time.

*February-March 1996*  
*Posted January 2021*  
*www.davidanguish.com*