

Have preachers lost their nerve?

By [Angela Dienhart Hancock](#)

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Do most American preachers stay silent on public issues to keep their congregations happy?

Researcher George Barna's comments on a radio show recently caused quite a stir in the evangelical blogosphere. [Barna says that a whopping 90 percent of the preachers he surveyed refrain from preaching on critical social and political issues](#), in spite of the fact that they believe the Bible has much to say about them. Why are preachers tongue-tied? According to Barna, they worry that raising controversial issues might have a negative impact on church attendance, financial support, and participation in church programs.

It's hard to respond to Barna's claims without being able to see the actual data. But his conclusion that 90 percent of pastors never mention pressing social, cultural, or political issues in their sermons is certainly not consistent with my experience.

My guess is that Barna primarily interviewed conservative evangelical pastors. And since the study is based on pastors' self-reporting, to test it we would need to look at their actual sermons. Preachers are not always reliable when it comes to reporting their own practice.

Barna's conclusions notwithstanding, I'd be willing to bet there are lots of preachers in America today who regularly bring together a deep reading of the Bible and attention to a wide range of social, political, and cultural issues. I've heard a number of such sermons myself, even preached a few. At Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, we encourage our preaching students to read the Bible in relation to the surrounding social, political, and cultural context, listening deeply on behalf of their hearers for a word from the Lord.

And even if it is in fact the case that most evangelical preachers are not speaking to the most controversial issues of the moment, that doesn't necessarily mean it is simply because they are cowards, afraid of losing money and members, as Barna suggests.

Controversial issues are recognized as controversial in churches precisely because thoughtful, faithful Christians disagree about them. Scripture requires interpretation, and Christians interpret with different assumptions, biases, and lenses. So an evangelical pastor's decision not to make a contentious political or social issue the focus of a sermon might be an acknowledgement that a 20-minute monologue is not the best way to foster rich, gracious conversation in a congregation. In a way, this decision may be profoundly countercultural, as stridently partisan voices dominate the radio and the blogosphere.

And the decision to preach beyond the issues that get the most airtime at the moment may also reflect a certain modesty: the recognition that while preachers do their best to listen deeply to the witness of Scripture in relation to the contemporary situation, we are not God. We cannot go to the Bible with our social/political agenda already figured out, confident that we know what we will find there. A sermon is not an exercise in political propaganda.

History teaches that pastors can be very wrong when they conflate the gospel with a particular social or political agenda. There were confident preachers who proclaimed the National Socialist movement in Germany as evidence of God at work and confident preachers who found biblical reasons to support the institution of slavery in this country. The fact that the Bible was invoked in such sermons was no guarantee of their faithfulness.

There are certainly times when it becomes clear that dramatic reformation or resistance is the faithful response to a social or political development. In those cases, courage is required. But it seems to me those times of complete clarity are relatively rare. And they usually involve standing with those at the margins of society, with the poor, the oppressed, the stigmatized.

For some, Barna's claim about preachers is bad news: a sign of a domesticated evangelical pulpit. But others welcome any potential evidence of a renewed modesty with regard to the human capacity to know and assert God's will in every situation we face in this complex world.