

# Empty Pulpits! Empty Pews!

by Larry E. Wilson, July 2026 (*revised*)

About 40% of the congregations in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church are without pastors. Does it alarm you that we have so many *empty pulpits*? Indeed, we're not alone. Many denominations are concerned about the present and growing shortage of needed pastors and missionaries. Our General Assembly has called our churches to a season of prayer and fasting during the week beginning September 13, 2026, asking the Lord of the Harvest to raise up and equip men for gospel ministry both at home and abroad.

Shouldn't we be equally alarmed that there are so many *empty pews* in our churches? Many who profess to follow Jesus not only neglect getting involved in church life but also neglect actively attending to all the elements of public worship. Some even neglect attending public worship at all.

Could these two things—empty pulpits and empty pews—be connected? Is it possible that God is giving his people in our day a taste of what he warned his old covenant church about in Amos 8:11–12? *“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, ‘when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but [a famine] of hearing the Word of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro to seek the Word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.’”*

Over 700 years before Christ, God sent Amos to preach to a backslidden, divided church. It was a time of power and affluence. In their prosperity, God's people had become corrupt and self-indulging. But it was also a time of religiosity. They professed his name and went through religious motions, but at the same time, they regarded God's ordinances—his holy day, his worship, his means of grace—to be annoying interruptions to their own business and pleasure. They went in droves, but their hearts stayed distant and cold. Instead of seeking God, they sought personal peace and affluence. Instead of striving to love their neighbors, they strove to exploit them.

So, God warned his people that he'd judge them—not just by sending disasters, but also by giving them something worse—“the silent treatment.” It would be horrific. People would run to and fro, searching for something to fill the spiritual void they felt. They'd crave what they had refused to listen to. But they wouldn't find it. Too late, they'd come to experience that God's Word is not a product that's there for you to take or leave as you wish. You can't get away with acting like it is.

This is what God's old covenant people experienced when God sent them into exile and then left them without prophets from Malachi until John the Baptist. We're not old covenant people living in the promised land, but the principles behind God's warning are still true. We still can't get away with treating God's Word like a product that's there for us to demand or refuse however we want. Yet isn't that what we do if we refuse to receive without objection what God's Word says is true? If we don't delight to obey what it commands? If we fail to take its warnings so seriously that we tremble before them? If we don't trust God's promises and act on them? If we neglect to open our Bibles during sermons and prayerfully ponder God's Word? If we routinely daydream—or even leave worship services—especially while God himself is talking to us through

Scripture reading and preaching? And if we skip public worship altogether, don't we do that in spades?

If we fail to gratefully listen and submit to God as he speaks to us by his Word, shouldn't we too fear that God will give us the "silent treatment" and chasten us with "a famine of hearing the Word of the LORD"? Such a famine might include his withholding sound, faithful preaching even while unsound or apostate preaching (spiritual "junk food" or "poison") stays readily available. It might include a shortage of faithful, diligent pastors. That would be "a famine of hearing *the Word of the LORD*." But it might also include God's withdrawing his grace that enables us to hear and heed what he's saying. That would be "a famine of *hearing* the Word of the LORD." If we harden our hearts to God's Word, shouldn't we fear that our spiritual sight will dim, our spiritual hearing will deafen, and our spiritual appetite will decline? If we keep putting off repentance, then our ability to repent will grow increasingly fainter. Eventually, those who persist in neglecting God's invitations and ignoring his warnings will find themselves shut out—and nothing will be able to reopen the door (see "the parable of the ten virgins" in Matthew 25. Half the virgins put off getting oil in their lamps until the Bridegroom appeared. But then it was too late!).

It's precisely because the Lord is so gracious and abounding in mercy that he keeps sending warnings like Amos 8:11–12. These are appeals of genuine *love*. But don't let that make you ignore the fact that they are at the same time genuine *warnings*! It would be folly to brush them off! Eventually the day of mercy will end. In a world that's hurtling toward destruction, it's easy to think all the problems are in the world, not the church. But shouldn't the sight of so many empty pulpits and empty pews make us look within and examine ourselves? Is this a way that our God calling *us* to wake up and seek him in faith and repentance, confessing and forsaking our sins, while we can still hear him speaking in mercy? Let's by no means ignore his call. Humbling ourselves before our God and Father with fasting, let's beg him to fill all our pews with earnest hearers and all our pulpits with earnest preachers. Let's beg him to reawaken and revive his church all around the world.

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**O living God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who is there and who is not silent: Please forgive us for treating your means of grace—the tools you supernaturally use to lavish your abounding mercy in Christ on us—as if they're interruptions. We thank and praise you that there is forgiveness with you because of your steadfast love and plentiful redemption in Christ. Please grant us—all who bear your name all around the world—repentance. Give us grace to fear you. Please make us hungry and thirsty to seek you and your Word. Make our ears keen to hear your Word. Make our hearts humble to heed your Word. Teach and lead us to walk with you day-by-day in faith and repentance. Stir us and many others to hear your voice and know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly. In mercy, please raise up and send out many faithful preachers and teachers of your Word to every land and every language. Prepare them. Equip them. Motivate them. Make them willing to go wherever you call them to go. Make them diligent and conscientious. Make them bold and clear. Anoint and empower them. Bless and use them. Grant much abiding fruit for your glory and the good of your kingdom. O living God, please hear our plea in the name of the only Mediator between God and man— Jesus, your Son and our Savior—Amen!**